

## Sirius, Book III

### The Essence

*Comments or Questions?*

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## Chapter 1

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Alps had a great deal to think about now. After everything he had been through, he felt he'd have enough to keep his mind and heart busy for months and months, but now, Nita had asked him to marry her. It was usually the female who proposed, this was true, but never someone of Nita's social standing to someone that was so far beneath her that the marriage might meet with serious opposition from her people. Still, Alps was seen now, at least locally, as a hero after the victories based on his avalanche tactic had worked so well. Perhaps it would not reflect on Nita badly at all. Perhaps it would even be a political boon to the queen. Alps looked out the window of the council chamber and thought of all these things. So much had changed, and it had only been... what... less than a year now?

"A lot on your mind, Alpsie?" came a feathery and soothing voice from behind him. It was Misty. She had entered with Nita and Nidaja. They were here for a reason of course. Now that Alps had been able to rest, and settle down again, there were a lot of questions, and a lot of tests to be run. Misty was holding a blue crystal sphere, which glowed softly. Alps got to his feet from the small wooden chair he'd been sitting in.

"Only a wedding and the recent bizarre adventures." came his smooth reply. He bowed courteously to Nita and the others.

"Soon, they will have to bow to you, you know." Nidaja said, nudging her sister a bit. Nita had told everyone the morning after Alps had accepted. How could he possibly refuse? It was an order by his mistress. Even though he really wanted to do it anyway, he was in no place to refuse her. He could not have been happier though. Alps wagged his tail slowly, and nodded.

"I know. It will take a lot of getting used to." he stated. He sat down on the plush velvet couch, and Misty handed him a pillow. Alps looked at her blankly, and then got pushed to his back on the couch by Nidaja. Alps grinned sheepishly. "Had I known you were bringing me here for this, I would have taken a bath." he churred. Nidaja pinched his nose.

"It's not for that." she said, putting the pillow under his head. She then nodded to Misty, who pulled a chair over beside Alps. Nita and Nidaja did the

same, leaving Misty in the middle, everyone alongside Alps. He looked at them with measured curiosity. Misty plucked a few hairs from Alps' cheek, which didn't really hurt, since he was shedding a bit, and she placed them on top of the mutely glowing orb. They faded away, and the orb glowed a bit brighter.

"You are going to feel sleepy soon, Alps." Misty said softly, placing her hands on his temple. Nidaja and Nita did the same, all of them touching his head softly, their eyes closed. Nita's tail was wagging.

"What is this for?" Alps asked softly.

"There are some questions that I have that you cannot answer because they are locked away in some of your earliest childhood memories. There is only one way for us to see them. This is a Mindwalk Sphere. It's an old Letai relic. It will let us move through your memories... your thoughts and dreams, until we find the answers we are looking for. Don't worry, this won't hurt at all. You will wake up feeling pretty rested, okay?" she said happily. Alps was already feeling groggy.

"Just make sure to put everything back where you found it. I don't wanna forget anything else." he said. Before, the thought of someone invading his mind and poking around in there, looking for things might have unsettled Alps, but nothing about this came close to the nature of being locked in that crystal. Besides, only his most trusted friends were going to be playing around in there. He kept no secrets from them. Anything they asked was open for them to know. There was no harm in letting them in there now. Besides, while he was not yet married to Nita, he was still very much a slave. His mind and body, now, and after he was married, as far as he was concerned, was property of his queen.

"We won't start in the same place in his mind." Misty said, more to Nidaja and Nita than to the white slave. "When you get into his mind, you will be disoriented and some things won't make sense. The laws of nature don't even really apply for the most part. Concentrate on finding earlier and earlier memories, okay?" she said. Nita and Nidaja nodded their heads, and the soft bobbing of their heads seemed to go in slow motion for Alps, as he felt almost wrenched from his couch, and into the air, and then tossed afloat upon the wind. Darkness came. Warm, comforting, embracing darkness. His friends could not get any closer to him than they were now. Alps slept.

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Nita looked around for a while. Misty was right. She felt very, very disoriented. She was unchanged in any way, which was oddly comforting. She

had feared arriving without clothes for some reason. She was standing in a small, fenced in yard outside of a wooden building. She walked around to the other side of it, and looked with curiosity at the sign that hung out front. The sign made no sense. She scratched her head. It just looked like an unintelligible jumble of letters and lines that resembled letters. Was she not able to read inside of his mind? She shook her head, understanding suddenly how very different being in someone else's mind would be. She could still read. Alps couldn't. his memories didn't know what the sign meant. He could not relay that to her, even if his memories of his earlier life were sharp.

Nita heard laughter. She turned quickly. There were four young lupines... children, dressed in white and tattered clothing. They were playing with a leather ball, almost bigger than they were which was apparently immense fun for them.

"Orphans..." she said to herself. "Oh, that's right... for Alps to legally be a slave, he had to have grown up in an orphanage and not been adopted." Nita slapped her forehead, feeling silly. She walked up to the four children. They could not see her. The memories of other places and other people only represented that. Memories. Nita looked around for something more familiar. A white-furred orphan. That's what she was meant to find. This was a very early memory, and his childhood mind might hold the answers to Misty's questions, and secretly, Nita's own.

Finally, not seeing Alps out here with the children, she decided to go inside. After all, no one would tell her to leave. She could go anywhere she wanted. She opened the large, heavy wooden door. It seemed a lot heavier than it should have been, but she realized that she was experiencing this from the point of view of Alps' memories. To a little orphaned wolf, this door had been terribly heavy.

Nita found Alps in the main hall, almost immediately after she had opened the door. She gasped, and held her hands in front of her chest, clasped tightly.

"Oh my love... Oh you sweet little thing, how cute!!" she squealed. She moved over to the white cub, and stood before him. "This has to be him. He's the only white lupine I have ever seen." She looked at him carefully. The child, perhaps only about six years of age, was very thin and scrawny, his fur a bit unkempt, and he was barely even dressed. He was wearing ripped shorts, a bit too small for him, and no shirt. He was on his knees, scrubbing the polished wooden floor. This was likely why he wasn't wearing much. He didn't want to get his clothes dirty doing these chores. Nita canted her head. "How come you are in here cleaning, when the other boys are outside playing with the oaf-ball?" she asked.

"They don't want to play with me..." he said softly, looking up at Nita. The emerald lupine queen gasped, backing up a bit.

"Alps?" she asked. Misty had not told her that Alps would be able to see her in his memories. This made things very different, and new questions cranked away quickly in Nita's mind.

"That's what Priestess Akeena named me, yes." he said softly. Nita's eyes widened. Alps had another name? Before he was an orphan? She had heard of new names being applied to children to separate them from painful pasts by priestesses who found them. Alps was looking at Nita now. She felt her heart swell. At this age, he was adorable, even as unkempt and sullen as he looked now. This pleased Nita for very selfish reasons. She would eventually be a mother, and seeing Alps at this age made her feel more content with that. One questioned burned as bright as the sun now in Nita's mind, and she had to ask it.

"What was your name before?" she asked, her heart pounding hard. This is something Alps had very possibly forgotten, and this little trip into his past would answer. She looked into his large, violet eyes as he gazed back up at him.

"Will you adopt me if I tell you? What name would you like me to have?" he asked. Nita felt her heart nearly break. It was so easy to forget how lonely Alps must have been as an orphan, especially with white fur, which had made it impossible for him to get adopted. The queen inhaled deeply, and, not able to really help herself, she leaned down and scooped up the cub into her arms. Alps rested in her arms limply. He was so very light. Nita wanted to take him someplace and get him cleaned up, and feed him, but it didn't really matter. This was not real. It was all in his mind.

"I cannot adopt right now. I am traveling." she said, being as honest as she could.

"I understand." Alps said, seeming to not really care very much. Perhaps asking to be adopted had become a lot like panhandling. Maybe at this point, he asked everyone.

"Will you tell me your name?" she asked.

"Alps." he answered.

"No, the one you had before that." Nita said, amazed at how distracted or perhaps even cynical he was at this age. He looked up into her eyes and nodded slowly.

"My name used to be Aris." he whispered. "I'm not s'posed to tell anyone though." he added. He looked around a bit fearfully. "Mick will tell on me if he hears. He always tells on me." Alps whispered. Nita nodded. Mick was likely another kid. She was more interested in what she'd just learned. It felt like

getting parts of a puzzle. Aris. His name had been Aris as a child. That name seemed familiar somehow.

"Aris is a very nice name." Nita said. "I know... this might be difficult for you..." she said, inhaling deeply. She toyed with simply not asking this, as it might be painful for the cub in her arms, which seemed so very fragile. But it was the second piece of the puzzle, as far as she was concerned, in finding out who this unusual slave really was. She wanted to know who he would have been if he were never a slave.

"Can't be any more difficult than finding a home." he said softly. "Can you put me down, lady? I will get in trouble if I don't finish scrubbing the floor." he said. Nita nodded, realizing that Alps was not consciously here. She was speaking to him deep into his past subconscious. It was so strange. He resumed scrubbing the floor.

"Alps... er... Aris... How did you... become an orphan?" Nita asked cautiously, expecting his mood to change sharply. It didn't. He remained as icily calm as he had been since she got here. Was Alps really like this as a kid? It would explain a few things, that was for certain. His answer chilled Nita.

"Orphans are orphans. They either get that way because their parents die, or because they get abandoned. They tell me I was abandoned." he says. "Probably for the same reason no one adopts me." Nita frowned, actually feeling a pang of guilt. At first, she too had judged Alps because of his odd fur-color. She wished she could just hold this cub, and let him know what happened to him later in life. To tell him everything would be okay, but if it did make a difference, it might completely change who Alps grew up to be. She would say nothing. She got on her knees, and watched him scrub the floor a little longer. She gazed at his face for a while. He'd been beaten up pretty frequently it seemed. That was to be expected though. He was scrawnier than the other kids, and an outcast. She felt so sorry for the poor cub.

"Where... were you found? Did someone leave you on the steps here?" Nita asked. Alps looked up at her almost sickly. Nita backed up a little.

"I wish..." he said, resuming scrubbing quietly. "I was found about two years ago in the ruins of an old shrine. I was left to the spirits they said. I was not supposed to survive. Some kids found me." he said. Nita went dead silent. Left alone? How old would he have been? Four or five, perhaps? Just a baby. It seemed like such a sad beginning for Alps. What kind of mother would have done that to him? Was his white fur that terrible for him? How could he have grown up to be kind and loving after all of this?

"You seem to regret... having survived..." Nita said softly, choking on her words. "Do you... wish you had died?" Suddenly, the queen began to feel that

Alps plunging the knife into his chest at her command when they first met might not have been blind obedience. It may well have been a long time coming. That didn't make her feel any better about it.

"Why would I wish to die?" Alps asked. Nita was taken aback, and canted her head slightly.

"Everyone is mean to you... The boys tease you. Your life has been so hard." she said. "What keeps you from just wanting to... throw it all away? What makes you not want to release your soul, and go back to the life essence?" Nita asked. She had to know. What had been his ray of hope? What had been the light that guided Alps through all this, and delivered him to her arms ultimately?

"Priestess Akeena." Alps stated. "She made sure to keep me from making the mistake of ... killing myself to release my soul... She told me the reason that it would be a really stupid mistake to do that." Alps said, barely even a whisper now.

"She said things will get better?" Nita said softly, suddenly wanting to commend that priestess if she was still alive. She had made sure Alps could make it through these years with less emotional damage, surely. "Did she tell you that you will someday know true happiness?" Nita asked, petting Alps' ears.

"No." Alps said softly, though not continuing to speak. He simply scrubbed as Nita pulled her hand away. What then? What revelation had kept Alps from giving up? How had he survived a life of such unfair treatment by almost everyone he ever knew? For his age, the boy seemed remarkably, almost eerily intelligent. He seemed mentally far older. This may have only further displaced him from adoption, and from being friends with the other children.

"What did she tell you?" Nita asked. "Why do you keep going?" Alps looked again at Nita with his calm, gentle, intelligent eyes, and said something that scarred Nita's heart forever. It showed Nita the deepest depth of cruelty that could ever have been done to her beloved. Nothing could have prepared her for the shame and viciousness of what Alps had been led to believe. Yet, his words came out so calmly and casually, that it seemed as if he were merely telling her a simple fact, like what day it happened to be.

"I have no soul."

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Nidaja looked around blankly. The dusty street was rather lonely, since it was dusk here, in whatever memory she had walked into. Nidaja had done this before. The Mindwalk Sphere was a tool used by the Amanian army now to examine their foes, find spies, and even in counter intelligence. Misty used it for her duties as a counselor, as she was now, but Nidaja was, perhaps, the most knowledgeable in the practical uses of the Mindwalk Sphere. Still, there was never a way to be certain of where in someone's mind you would be when you first made contact. The lupine general looked up and down the street. In the middle of the courtyard she was standing in was a well. By the well was a small stage. Across from it was a large house. Beside that house was a blacksmith's shop. On the other side of the house was a bakery of some kind. Nidaja could smell the bread baking.

"I know this place." Nidaja said, blinking a bit. "This was where I first met you." she said. "This is the town of Luca, where you used to live. Please don't tell me I am going to see your memory of meeting me. That would be useless even if a little entertaining." she laughed. Nidaja heard a shout from the house. It was a female voice, which sounded very, very angry. She looked over at the house as she approached it slowly. Nidaja tried the door carefully. It was locked.

"Oh Alps... you don't want me to go in here?" Nidaja said softly, hearing another angry shout, and a dull thump. Her ears perked. That was a sound she knew. Someone was being beaten up. She growled softly. "Oh this better not be what I think it is..." she said. "You can't hide this from me. I know the power of this sphere a lot better than you." Nidaja jumped up with both feet, and kicked both out in front of her, practically splintering the door apart. She landed deftly on her feet, and walked inside.

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"This simply cannot be." Misty said softly, looking around. The place was rather dark, but it was a style of architecture that Misty had simply been dumbfounded to see in Alps' memories. She caressed over a white marble column. This room seemed to be the living room of perhaps a rich socialite, or something of that nature, but its design was very old. It was similar to the ruins of Letai temples that Misty had seen. "Is this from your experience in the Shadowfall Crystal? Where you met the death priestess?" She looked around the dark room, whispering to herself. "No... This can't be it... Where is this in your past? Am I close to the answer?" she asked.

Misty slowly wandered around the room, looking at everything she could find. There was nothing tangible here, but many of the things that would have

been shiny, like candleholders, or a key hanging on the hearth of the fireplace, were very easy to see. Misty looked beyond the fireplace. There were winding stairs which went up. They were marble, like the rest of the structure, and a deep, rich green carpet went up into the spiraling darkness. Misty followed it up slowly. There were pictures on the wall, but Misty could not make out what they were.

"You must be pretty young Alps, to not even know what these pictures were," she said softly. "Why are you in this place? This looks like the living quarters in a Letai Life Temple. I don't know that any of these ever existed in your lifetime. Where is this Alps? Where are you in this place?" The long-furred Misty found herself in a hallway. There was a door all the way at the very end. Hanging on the door was a very cute-looking smiling crystal mask. Misty rubbed her chin curiously. "A Letai Spirit Ward," she said softly. "Things are just getting stranger and stranger... And it's all supporting what I suspected. Oh Alps... how can this possibly be?" The counselor moved to the door, opened it, and walked inside.

In a very nice silver crib, padded with warm, soft pillows and blankets, Misty found what she had been looking for. She scooped up the two year old and looked at him, as he opened his eyes. Alps was wrapped in a silk nightshirt, and seemed very healthy and comfortable. His eyes slowly opened. They were already their normal purple hue. He gazed at Misty quietly, reaching out with his little hands, trying to touch her nose. Misty hugged him to her chest, suddenly very much in love.

"So this was the start of your life..." she said, sitting on a chair by the crib, and holding the child in her lap. "It doesn't look so bad. How on earth did you go from this... to being a slave? Your parents seem to love you, even with your pure white fur," she said. "I know everyone always assumed that your parents abandoned you, but by seeing this, I rather doubt that. I hope Nita and Nidaja find some information about how you ended up alone like that. And better yet... I hope they find out where this is. I should like to see what's here in the present," she said. Misty jumped slightly, as she heard the door open. Candlelight spilled into the room. Misty found herself wanting to hide. She scolded herself, knowing full well she was not an active part in what was really going on here. She placed the child back in the crib though, and backed up. A robed figure moved through the room, and Misty cursed herself softly, since she was not standing where she could see the figure's face.

"Hiya sweetie..." came a strangely familiar feathery voice. "I know it's very late. Your mother's here though. I bet you are so hungry," she said softly. She sat down in the chair by the crib, holding the child to her chest. She looked up, smiling happily, seeming so content at herself now. Seeing the happy mother's face, Misty staggered backwards, and choked back a cry of surprise. Finally, holding her face, she coughed out,



"Impossible! How... How can this be?!"

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Nita sat up slowly, having slumped over in her chair. She was sitting back in the council chamber where she had linked with Alps' mind. Nidaja and Misty were both still asleep, it seemed. Alps was nowhere to be found. She looked at the empty couch curiously, and the softly glowing Mindwalk sphere. Nita reached over and shook Misty and Nidaja both awake.

"Hey! Wake up!" she chimed. Misty snerked and rubbed her eyes, and then gasped. She looked at Nita very excitedly, wagging her tail from the things she'd discovered.

"Oh dear heavens... Nita! You won't believe this... I don't even know how it's possible but-" Nita cut her off and pointed at the couch.

"Where is my fiancé?" the queen churred expressively. Misty blinked and shook her head, as if just snapping back into reality. She looked at the couch.

"He... left?" she asked, rubbing her ears. "I have such important news for him though!" she cried. Nita nodded softly.

"I do too!" she said. "I found out some very important stuff, and I have something I really need to tell him!" She thought back to the last thing he'd said before their link ended. She just had to make sure he didn't still believe something so unfair.

"I'm right here." Nidaja said softly, expressing a bit of confusion. Nita and Misty both looked at her.

"Yes, we can see you. We are looking for Alps though. Did you see him leave?" Nita asked, seeming a little confused by Nidaja's statement as well.

"No... I didn't leave. I'm right here." Nidaja said. There was something timid in her voice that Nita felt was very out of place. Misty's ears slicked back. She suddenly looked a bit fearful. Nita looked into Nidaja's eyes. They were round, confused, and a little fearful looking. They were the same as...

"A... Alps?" Nita whispered, looking at her sister.

"Yes?" she asked. Nita covered her mouth, gritting her teeth.

"Oh, Misty... It *is* him... Then where is Nidaja?" she said, touching the empty couch.

"Oh... By the lights..." Misty said. "Nidaja... must have switched her mind with Alps'."

"Why?!" Nita fairly cried. Nidaja squealed in shock. Nita and Misty looked at her. With wide, fearful eyes, she was looking at her chest. A little slow on the uptake, Alps was now fully aware of the reason for confusion.

"How did this happen?!" Nidaja cried. "Can you *fix* it?!" Misty reached out and stroked the general's face soothingly.

"Yes. We can fix this... We just have to find Nidaja! She's got your body." Misty said. Nidaja hugged herself, Alps' mind adjusting to a completely different body.

"Was this an accident?" Nita asked. "Maybe Nidaja was afraid and ran off?" the queen offered.

"No." Misty said. "Nidaja has mastered the Mindwalk Sphere. She knows exactly what she's doing. We just have to figure out why!"

"Nita?" Nidaja said in a shaky voice. She was still clutching her chest.

"Yes... Alps?" she said, her mind seeming to warp at the concept of his mind being in a different body.

"How do you walk without falling over..? These things are heavy." Nita looked at Alps-turned-Nidaja and part of her mind metaphorically threw itself out the window.

## Sirius, Book III

### *The Essence*

*Comments or Questions?*

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## Chapter 2

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Nidaja nodded to Nita slowly as she explained the matters at hand. Alps didn't like any of this. It was scary to be stuck in a body that was not your own, especially not knowing where your real body had gone. He felt very detached. There were parts that his mind told him were still there that were not, and those that his mind wasn't used to yet that his mind became confused and startled about when he became aware of them. It was terribly disconcerting.

"Alps... you cannot tell anyone what is going on right now. No one who doesn't already know." The queen explained. Nidaja nodded, Alps' trapped mind understanding. He was slowly and clumsily adjusting to being female. The harrowing and disturbing trip to the bathroom, and having to greet the members of the high council already this morning had both been tests on his sanity. Nidaja would be excused from any military functions for a few days. Everyone would be told that she was merely very sick, but would get better. Nidaja's Alps-possessed body would avoid contact with everyone until he could get his own body back. What had possessed Nidaja to not even ask if it was okay?

Nita looked up as she heard quick footsteps approach the door to her chambers. The door swung open without so much as a knock. It was Misty. She had Azia in tow. The Silverlight general nearly crashed into the back of the council member as she stopped quickly.

"I found out where Alps went!" she panted. The lupine slave had to fight the urge to blurt out 'I'm right here.'" However, Nidaja looked down, fearing that even his eyes would give away the truth. Azia moved over and hugged Nidaja however, very awkwardly for the residing Alps. Those two had definitely become best friends in the time they had been together.

"Where?" Nita asked impatiently. She was obviously trying to hide how dire the situation was to her, but was failing, to be certain.

"Alps showed up this morning at the docks." Azia answered, Nita and Nidaja both looking up at her stressfully. "Tia was going to visit her grandfather and bring him some money and some supplies to help out, since things have calmed down." the white-furred female explained. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes, fine." Nidaja said. "Please continue." Nita smiled awkwardly, looking at the form of her sister. Alps was trying very hard to imitate her. It was probably rather funny for Nita, who knew her sister well enough to see through it, to watch.

"Well, Alps showed up, and seemed very adamant about going with her." Azia stated. Nita stood up, seeming ready to immediately run out and catch up.

"Where did she go? Where does her grandfather live?" Nita asked. Misty seemed to be ready to go too.

"The town of Luca." she answered simply.

"Oh by the lights... No..." Nidaja said.

"Beg pardon?" Azia asked.

"N - Nothing..." Nidaja said softly. Nita stood up and looked to Azia.

"I take it Tia and Alps took your boat?" she asked. Azia nodded.

"Then Nidaja... You may have Uri and Misha take you to Jalana and you can go to Luca from there." Nita proclaimed. Her words were very stern, and not the type anyone would argue with, even if they wanted to object. "Azia, Misty and I need to remain here to handle our growing defense docket in your absence." she said. "Please hurry!"

Nidaja and Misty were summarily dispatched to get ready for Nidaja's impromptu trip to a place that Alps knew well, and Misty knew almost not at all. Why did he not have to take Misty with? Surely he could not hide from prying eyes without help? If he needed something while he was out, Misty could get it, and he would not, in Nidaja's form, have to approach anyone who might know her, and ask questions he'd not know the answer to. It would be a long, hard trip, either way.

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"You know why she is going, don't you?" Nita asked Nidaja. Within the general's body, Alps felt a surge of dread again. Nidaja nodded slowly.

"If she saw my memories of that place then yes, I do." She said in a half whisper. Nidaja and Nita were standing on the dock, as the sun sank low over the hills behind them. By now, Nidaja's mind was a day of travel ahead of her

body. Alps would not be able to get to her before she arrived in Luca, no matter how hard he tried. Azia's ship was one of the fastest ever made.

"Please forgive my sister..." Nita said softly. "If she succeeds in what she is trying to do." Nita added. "She has a very deep sense of her debt to justice, and she's very fond of you... Seeing that would have been hard to take." the queen explained. Nidaja nodded softly, and heard the whistle from Uri to tell her that the ship was ready.

"I will forgive her. Don't think this never crossed my mind, on those dark and cold nights." Nidaja said, shaking her head. "Everything will be fine. You take care of things here." she said. Nita nodded, and then looked around to make sure no one was looking, and then embraced Nidaja, kissing her deeply. Nidaja kissed back, seeming to forget about the change in bodies suddenly. To any on the dock, it would have been quite disturbing to watch. The queen and her physical sister kissed for some time, before Alps finally realized how it looked, and carefully pushed Nita back into place, blushing, and glancing around to see if he could see any stupefied, emotionally scarred dock-workers. The queen finally chuckled softly.

"Hurry, don't waste any time!" she said, licking her lips sweetly. "Travel safely... We still have a wedding to plan." she said. Alps got onto the boat within his Nidaja shell, and the light craft immediately weighed anchor and began to drift away from the dock. Nidaja watched as Misty ran up the dock to join Nita in waving the boat away.

Nita looked at Misty as she grumbled a bit, and snapped her fingers.

"What's up?" Nita asked. "Did he forget to take something with him?" she seemed a little worried.

"No, I just didn't get to tell Alps the big news. In the confusion I didn't have time. I think he would have been so surprised and happy." Misty said.

"You can tell me, then." Nita said, walking back toward the road with Misty.

"Would you like to know who his mother is?" the doctor asked. Nita blinked, and just stared at Misty.

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"It's really nice to be traveling with you again." Misha said to Nidaja as she

parked her hips beside the general. Nidaja scooted a bit, wanting to minimize contact and prevent her friends from finding out the secret that she was holding. If it became known, as Nita explained, it could cause a bit of weakness and confusion in the military and government. This was NOT the time for that! However, Alps knew that he would be unable to completely avoid contact with two of Nidaja's closest friends on this trip. It would take three days on the fast trade currents between Diera and Jalana.

"I hope we can catch up to... Alps... before he does something silly." Nidaja said, the lupine internally reflecting on how different it was to hear her voice when he was speaking. Uri padded down into the chamber below the deck where her friends were. She hopped up on the bed, the black-furred ocean-faring lupine seeming her usual spunky self.

"Shall we pass the time our usual way?" she asked, wagging her tail rapidly. Nidaja felt a hot flash through her entire body. It was the first sensation of female arousal that the mind of the white lupine had ever experienced, and that flood of warmth was something he could not combat at all. He knew he should shoo them away, and say that 'she' was feeling a bit seasick or something of that nature, but the thought of feeling sexual pleasure in a new body was so incredibly alluring to the very curious wolf. His internal conflict was that it wasn't his body to play with. It was Nidaja's. That was all that kept him from voraciously exploring her new body and pleasure on his own in private already. The thought *had* crossed his mind more than once.

"I... Umm... Errr..." Nidaja stammered, shifting a bit where she sat on the bed. Misha slid around behind her, and got onto her knees, starting to massage the general's shoulders warmly. Nidaja sighed and leaned into the massage, as Uri moved around on her knees in front of her. The green-furred Nidaja bristled a bit with pleasure at their skilled and gentle touch, as Uri began to stroke her face. This was like being worshipped! Was this the kind of thing Nidaja expected as a general, or as a friend? Alps could not tell, and right now, there seemed to be more concerns which pressed upon him to the immediate moment.

It was at that moment, a very profound realization came to the disguised slave. Alps, in Nidaja's body, had felt different almost immediately. He had finally, as Misha and Uri touched this perfect body, discovered what it was. His life as a slave had been a very physically harsh one. Alps had a lot of old wounds, hurts, and pains that troubled him, like shadows of his past, even in his new life. In this body, however, they were gone. There were no old broken bones or lungs scarred slightly from pneumonia. The feeling of apparent constant pleasure that he felt in being in this body had not been pleasure at all. It was merely the absence of pain. Now, without pain, Alps was feeling *real* pleasure in this body for the first time. Soft lips embraced Nidaja's own, as Uri kissed her passionately, the broad lupine tongue of a willing female slipping in to explore readily. Alps gave up control of the moment. They would be suspicious

if 'she' resisted, or even hurt by her rejection! He knew Nidaja would forgive him, especially since she was possibly doing far worse things with Alps' body. So, for now, he allowed them to do to Nidaja's body anything they wanted. Truthfully, he wanted it, and by the way they were treating Nidaja, he knew she would want it too, if she were in *his* body.

She general felt her clothes being slowly loosened, and ultimately removed, piece by piece, by Misha as the boat lurched slowly from side to side on the current that it rode. Prickly desire continued to bake its way through the lupine female's body, tearing at the male slave's mind and sanity. He found, at a point, he really could no longer have said no, no matter how wrong he might have felt it was to go on.

Upon getting those clothes off, Nidaja was pulled onto her back, and Uri and Misha carefully and sultrily undressed in front of her. It felt like a submission ritual, to be frank, and more and more, Alps began to understand what had caused Nidaja's knowledge and appreciation of lovemaking in the first place. This was a side to the social structure the wolf slave was finally beginning to understand.

Alps felt the general's heart beating more rapidly in a chest that felt warm, heavy, and tight. Feeling excitement as a female was so different to him, but it was giving him a good lesson on how to handle the female body. This made him feel a little more confident about letting this happen. He would use what he learned now to give better pleasure to Nita later. That made this far more justifiable. More and more, his mind convinced him that the use of this body was right. For now, at least. Those hands, the hands of Nidaja's beloved friends, continued to touch and caress and rub the general's body in ways that made Alps just want to cry. It felt so wonderful, each and every second of it, and each second made those sensations grow in her body and well up as if it were about to overflow.

It was Uri who was the first to send a violent shiver through that body that they were unknowingly exploring for the first time. She leaned down, and lustfully took one of the general's nipples into her hot mouth, dragging a ragged, hissing moan from her lips. Uri's hand clamped tight around the mound of warm flesh to force more blood into that already tight, pert nipple, increasing the sensation a lot there. Nidaja arched her back, squeezing her thighs together as the sensations of hot desire raced through the mind of a slave for the very first time. Female nipples felt a *completely* different sense of pleasure from his own. Nidaja's hands reflexively went to her tummy, rubbing it up and down slowly. The slave didn't know why this felt necessary. Alps' mind and Nidaja's body both did not want this to stop.

"Mmmm... I think she's about ready... That was fast." Misha said, sliding slowly down the general's legs. "It usually takes a bit longer to get you so worked

up, Nidaja.“ she chuckled. Alps wondered if they would be able to tell that Nidaja wasn't the one occupying this form if he were to try to return the pleasure. He didn't know how to do all the same things Nidaja did. For now, he would try to just let them pleasure her. Perhaps that was all they really wanted. After all, this might be something Nidaja forced them to do, whether they enjoyed it or not. Alps would let things go the way they were naturally progressing.

Nidaja gasped loudly as the sensation of being filled with a broad, strong tongue nearly sent her to what Alps felt had to be the very limit of pleasure to this body. Her legs quivering, Alps felt the side to side motion of that powerful tongue right over the general's clit. He felt detached, since it wasn't his body, and yet, closer to Nidaja than he ever could have believed. Nidaja whined loudly, shaking as she surpassed the highest level of pleasure Alps could ever remember feeling.

"Ooooooh, yeah... Looks like she really needed this!" came Uri's excited coo. Look how she's rubbing herself!" The lupine slave barely opened Nidaja's eyes, and realized he was massaging her breasts, and teasing those sensitive nipples. The two females seemed to approve of it, so he didn't stop. He didn't *want* to stop.

"So... on edge..." the green-furred wolfess panted. The slave could not hold back saying at least something now. Alps was beginning to understand why his service to the queen in the manner it had been initially given was so important. This was heaven! Nidaja arched her back, and held Misha's ears desperately, as she felt what could only be described in Alps' mind as multiple heavy explosions racking her body all over, pulses of pleasure and euphoria that lurched through her like the ocean crashing down upon her. It was so easy! She hardly had to do anything, and the pleasure just came to her, rushing in like nightfall on the shortest day of winter!

She held her breasts feeling like her heart might burst through them. Alps felt his mind practically shredded by the sheer magnitude and force of Nidaja's climax. Misha buried her muzzle tighter against the general's sex, as she made her cum so very easily again and again and again. Uri squealed in delight as well, holding Nidaja's shoulders.

The experience Alps had with orgasms was that they left him satisfied and weak and sleepy. This was completely different for Nidaja's body! Her body still felt on fire, and she writhed, groaning as the waves of pleasure continued to tear through her like a stampeding herd. Uri motioned to Misha, and they giggled, switching places. Uri had a shorter muzzle, but it seemed a longer tongue. Being filled was a completely new experience for Alps' mind within Nidaja, but it felt every bit as satisfying as pressing deeply into Nidaja had the first time they had sex in that hotel room in the town he had lived in.. The town he was going back to.



At a breaking point physically, Nidaja wailed, as a rapid and eager tongue fluttered within her. She looked over to Misha, who was fidgeting with a drawer in the wall. She unlocked it, and took a sex toy out. A double-headed dildo that had two harnesses on it. While Nita and Azia knew it well, Alps had never seen it. He was puzzled by it, since he'd not really played with toys before. He'd been in the past all the toy the female he was with ever needed.

"Oh Misha, yes!" Uri said, rising up on her knees as she pressed her tongue deeply into Nidaja. The general grunted, gasped loudly, and her hips lurched upward, as her juices flooded the black-furred lupine's muzzle. The general then squealed, as Uri only increased her attack, while Misha turned on her hands and knees, and pressed that thick, long phallic toy into her own dripping wet sex, about half way in, and then fastened the clasping leather harness. She then moved around, rump to rump with Uri, and the shorter, younger lupine groaned loudly, as she felt her lover back into her, pressing that thick faux-cock into her body. Nidaja panted heavily, her breath raspy as she watched. Alps had no particular desire to feel that, since he was perfectly happy with what he was feeling now, in this sex-worshipped body. It was still very exhilarating to watch!

The slave got a chance to rest in that aching, scorching body, as Uri lifted her head, and reared back a bit, to help fasten the straps of Misha's toy. She held her legs a little closer together, and lowered back down, cupping her muzzle over Nidaja's mound, stabbing deeply again with her tongue, and making the general squeal again, loud and hard. Now rump to rump, rather firmly, Misha started to rock her hips, sliding the toy out of herself until the strap pulled tight, and then a little out of Uri, before pressing back against her lover. They both groaned as the hard, thick toy pressed into their lusty bodies. Together, they began to rock back and forth.

Alps watched through Nidaja's half closed eyes, shaking violently from the pleasure tearing through her body, as the two finally started ferally rutting against each other, that quick whip of a tongue stirring Nidaja's body to climax after climax, as the slave's mind, not yet used to this level of sensation just opened the flood gates. Alps let Nidaja's body feel every single stroke, and held nothing back, much to the other two girls' pleasure.

The next twenty minutes or so were a blur of pleasure, seeming to move in slow motion, as the cries of Uri and Misha soon joined the air with Nidaja's, and all three seemed to, for that heavenly half hour, melt into an indistinguishable pile of squealing, wet, panting, hot flesh and fur.

As Uri lurched back into Misha, Misha cried, and as Misha's cry hit its highest note, Uri wailed, and grunted, huffing her hot breath over Nidaja's throbbing mound, and the general would buckle a bit, and cry out, grasping her

breasts tightly. Alps was shocked by how intense it all was. Why did Nidaja need a male at all, if this is what Misha and Uri made her feel? He then felt a hot rush of warmth in his mind, rather than his body.

Nidaja didn't need him.

She wanted him. She actually *wanted* him. So did Nita, or any of the others. The pleasure wasn't what they were after. He wasn't just providing a valuable service with his body. He was wanted for more.

As he considered this, the pleasure became of mind and body at the same time, and he could not take it any longer. He threw his head back and howled, Nidaja's voice splitting the night. It caused a *hard* simultaneous climax for her friends, who just jerked tight, held still, and shuddered, groaning and grinding their backsides together over the double-ended toy. Slowly, whimpering and panting was all that held back silence in this now warm, humid room.

Finally, Alps heard the snapping of the clasps on Misty's side of the toy, and she lurched off the bed, falling happily, sated, onto her back on the wooden floor of the cabin. Uri gurgled a bit, and sprawled alongside Nidaja's panting form.

Dazed within her sex-battered body, Alps' mind crackled and sputtered. He held a greater respect for exactly what he *could* do for Nita and the others now. While he had originally feared it might be a very long trip in this unfamiliar body, the out-of-body male began to realize that in all honesty, he would probably find it too short for his liking. Nidaja closed her eyes, as Alps' mind refused to continue to make this body do anything more, and he enjoyed sleep in a body he had never fallen to sleep in before. A sleep without the pain his old body had known, only pleasure.

He would get his body back, of that he was certain, but he would be better educated for the trouble. Perhaps this was not such a bad experience after all.

**Sirius, Book III**  
*The Essence*

*Comments or Questions?*

Contact Alps: [sarsis@gmail.com](mailto:sarsis@gmail.com)

Or just drop a note at: <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/sarsis/>

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**Chapter 3**

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Nidaja stood at the bow of the ship, and gazed out over the ocean in a body that was not her own. It had been a day. The sun had set, the chill air now caused white fur to bristle. She winced, feeling a stab of dull pain, likely forgotten by this body's original mind, but brand new to her. The ribs? His feet. His back? One of his ears. Nidaja reached up and slid a finger over a scar on the back of Alps' ear she'd never noticed before until she felt the dull pain that came with having it. The general, hidden within Alps' form, growled softly. All this pain, every day of his life. Alps never complained about it. It was so common place to him. Nidaja knew exactly where this pain came from though. She knew what caused it. And it would *not* go unpunished. The general slammed her fist on the railing, growling again.

"Alps, what is it?" came a sweet, small voice from behind. Nidaja gasped, and spun around, gazing at Tia with a white face and violet eyes.

"I... Ah. What do you mean?" she said, feeling silly somehow, speaking in Alps' soft, submissive male voice. She was adept at taking his personality, but it felt so unnatural.

"You seem angry." the grey female half-whispered. She slipped her arms around Alps, and nuzzled his chest softly. Nidaja hugged back a little thoughtlessly, concentrating less on Tia's affection, and more on tricking her into believing it was Alps.

"I forgot ... Umm... Uh... Candy." his voice thrummed. Tia looked blankly up at him. Real swift, Nidaja thought to herself. Alps smiled broadly.

"You feelin' alright?" the wolf's loving friend asked.

"Yeah." he said, Nidaja's mind reeling. "Say... Um, Tia... You remember Mistress Chana?" he asked. Even the name soured Nidaja's stomach.

"I do. She was not very nice, Alps. You might want to avoid her. I doubt she will want to see you again." Tia said seriously.

"Did you know what she was like? To me I mean? What she did when no

one was watching?" Nidaja asked through Alps' mouth. Tia turned and looked out over the sea. She lowered her head onto her crossed arms, leaning on the railing.

"You didn't talk about it, but I knew. Everyone did. No one's that stupid. You had a new injury almost every day." she said in a soft, single breath. "And we didn't do anything. We didn't say anything. Alps, I'm so sorry..." Tia shuddered a bit. Nidaja gritted Alps' teeth, as she looked at the grey female. This sullen mood wasn't what she had wanted to cause. A white lupine hand came to rest on Tia's back as she sighed softly, seeming to feel very bad suddenly. Nidaja had only wanted to know if Tia knew about it, and hadn't realized that she felt bad for doing nothing.

"Tia... It's alright. Chana's a regional matriarch. If anyone said anything, she could make life very hard for them." he said. "I... I think I can make things right now, though. I don't belong to her anymore, and I want to go into town ... this time, with my head held high." Nidaja said. It would be different. Absolutely, it would be different. No one could make 'Alps' back down now. It might not be her body, but Nidaja could still fight using this one. She just could not cast spells to increase her strength as she could in her own body.

The cool night air made it feel almost like a requirement to move a little closer to Tia, which Alps, piloted by Nidaja, gladly did. The white lupine then felt an arm encircle him as his friend held him. Nidaja smiled, feeling a little better that back then Alps wasn't really alone. She wanted to ask Tia if she cared for those wounds Alps got from Chana, but she could not. Alps would have remembered that. She just looked out over the ocean.

"I'd kill her if it were not against the law." came soft words from Tia. Nidaja gritted her teeth again, and looked dumbfounded at Tia.

"I would not... Want that kind of trouble for you." came a masculine, but gentle reply.

"I know." said Tia softly. "Otherwise I would have done it by now - could have done it right after I joined the Spirits of Silverlight." Tia said. "Azia would not have allowed it though." she said.

"Thank you for being there for me back then." Alps said softly. "And right now." he finished, and leaned in close to Tia. A warm brush of lips, and then a true kiss followed. Nidaja hoped it was okay that she did this. She knew that Alps was now Nita's - mind, body, and soul. They would soon be life-mates. Nita would not likely make Alps stop being with those closest to him, like Nidaja, though Uri and Misty and Misha might see a bit less of him. Tia too. Nita loved sharing him, though. That was genuine. There was no real jealousy, as long as Alps never pushed her away for want of someone else, which Nidaja knew would

never happen.

The kiss lasted a while, and Nidaja found her dominant traits coming out unbidden. By the time the kiss was over, Tia was pressed against the railing, and Nidaja had Alps holding her firmly in his strong arms. He was a bit sturdier than his attitude led Nidaja to believe. If he wanted to be more forceful in bed, he most certainly could have been! Nidaja looked into Tia's eyes. What was she doing?

The general swallowed then, realizing that Alps' little friend had been a bit more into the kiss than she had originally realized. Tia's hand slid down after the kiss broke, and grasped between his legs, making Nidaja shudder heavily. It was hard. That tab of flesh that she had explored just a bit when relieving 'herself' a few hours before, was now much larger, and very hard. She had not realized how fast that happened, or how intense it felt when it did! Despite her control over this form, Nidaja groaned.

"Mmmm... Yes, you need a little attention, Alpsie." Tia crooned softly into the wolf's white ear. Nidaja quivered all over, and ground her hips against Tia's grasp. So this is what males felt when they were held like this. She suddenly found herself completely aroused, even mentally, due to wanting to know what it felt like to have this aching muscle buried in Alps' sweet little friend. Such desires come with being a dominant female sometimes.

Tia then sank to her knees, her back to the railing of the boat, as Alps, under Nidaja's control, reached out and held the rail at chest level. He gasped as he felt the ties to his trousers undone by the deft hands of his female friend. Nidaja looked over her shoulder. The boat was piloted by a small crew, and was not a terribly large craft. This would surely get noticed! At the moment however the only crew members were not in view, only the captain steering, who could not see what was going on because of convenient placement of the rigging of the mast.

"Are you... Sure it's okay to do this? I mean... It's Azia's boa-" Nidaja's protest in Alps' voice stopped as she felt a searing hot muzzle take the entire length of his cock. She lowered her head, her arms crossed over the railing, looking down at Tia as she slipped forward, taking in that hot pink length, and then pulling back, and then slipping forward again. Nidaja half-closed Alps' eyes and groaned deeply. Oh yes, she would definitely be doing this to him more often. She had no idea it felt this incredible!

As Tia started to bob her head, Nidaja began to feel the pain Alps always felt slowly fade away. She smiled and felt better even still. Those times that she had been with Alps, that she and her friends and sister had loved him to the point of exhaustion had not hurt him. They soothed him. Nidaja closed her eyes, and let Tia work with Alps' body in a way that she imagined Alps had surely felt

before. His legs tightened a bit as the female gray lupine pulled Alps' tightening, throbbing flesh from her muzzle, and began to flutter her tongue on the tip of it. It was so much sensation of pleasure that it was almost painful! She had no idea how sensitive this thing was!

For each and every second of pleasure, Nidaja learned new things, and remembered certain things that she just could not wait to try to do to Alps in excess now that she knew what it felt like. She then got a chilling sensation of displacement for a brief moment, as she wondered if Alps was exploring her body. She had to stifle a chuckle at that, as she considered the internal conflict he must be feeling about it. Then, her half-chuckle was stolen away with a groan, as Tia took his length back in, and muzzle-rode it briskly for a few seconds. Nidaja, not used to the way this felt, became aware of a strong desire to move her hips, but she knew it better to hold still.

Then, all at once, a welling of heat boiled through his body, as Alps' friend briskly pumped her muzzle over his cock, letting her hand trail wetly over base of it, which began overwhelming the general's senses. This was it. He was going to cum. She was used to being female, and didn't have any idea what popping as a male felt like, so she didn't think to hold back. She panted with Alps' aching lungs faster, and whimpered out approvingly to the younger wolf female.

"Mmmnn.. You are really getting' into this, Alpsie..." Tia panted, pulling her muzzle from Alps' shaft, and pumping with just her hand for a bit. Nidaja groaned loudly.

"Oh stars... No... don't stop. I feel so... Nng... Ohh..." Nidaja gasped again as Tia's muzzle took its place on that thick, hot shaft again. A little more. Just a little more. Oh how it felt to be on the edge. It felt like Nidaja's very existence rode on this coming moment. A bit more. Just a bit more.

Suddenly, a hot surge went through that tense body, and Nidaja felt a sudden sinking, debilitating dizziness, and had to grab the railing to keep from falling backwards, as Tia gulped loudly, getting hit with a thick splash of hot lupine seed on the back of her tongue, almost choking. She then very deeply and aggressively continued to suckle on that gushing length of lupine flesh. Nidaja buckled, trembling, gasping for air. It was almost more than she could take! That short time after climax was great, but the sensations were almost too intense for her after bursting like that. How on earth was Alps able to keep going after something like that? It wasn't a natural ability, like she had thought he might be blessed with. It shocked Nidaja to discover it was simply his raw will to keep going to pleasure those he loved. It made her feel even better about him to know that.

For a rather uncomfortable minute or so, trembling from the intense pleasure and near pain of Tia's continued oral sex, Nidaja held still, clutching the

railing. Finally, that warm, abusive muzzle left his aching shaft, which twitched a bit from the attention. Nidaja panted heavily, and looked around dizzily for a moment. No one saw. Then again, it lasted, what, five minutes? The lady general felt sleepy in this body. Did Alps always feel like this afterwards? It felt nice though. It was a pleasant sleepiness. It reminded her of what it was like to train out on a cold day for hours, and then sit in front of the fire to rest.

Tia licked her lips softly, and looked up into Nidaja's eyes through Alps'. She chuckled softly, and stood up, brushing her knees off, though the deck was spotless, so there wasn't anything to brush off.

"Mmm.. That was easy. I guess with everything goin' on, you haven't been getting much attention like that, huh?" she asked. Alps' ears tinted rose.

"Uhh... Yes." he said, Nidaja feeling quite stupid and weak right now. She clumsily retied the ties to Alps' pants, and swayed a bit. It took some time, but she started to feel normal again, and looked back over to Tia, who was looking out over the ocean, smiling with a little smirk. Did she not want the favor returned? She just did that to Alps for fun, to make him pop? Nidaja chuckled, and put an arm around Tia, feeling happy that her lupine slave friend had other friends who liked him that much.

"Kidjoul!" came a cry, which sent chills down Nidaja's spine, since it was so unexpected. There was a bit of chaos for a couple moments as the crew members scrambled up on deck. Mostly males who belonged to females in Azia's army, they were very responsive, but Nidaja knew this was probably the only life they knew. They were trained just for the purpose of sailing. There were no soldiers on board. This was extremely unfortunate.

"Kidjoul!" came the cry again, as everyone turned, looking out over the ocean. There was a sudden impact against the port side, opposite of where Tia and Alps had been. Alps cried out softly.

"What?! They are already on us? We were moving so fast!" he yelled, looking to that side of the ship. It was another ship, almost the same size, which now had iron spike embedded into the side of the hull of Azia's vessel. This was used to lock the vessels together, a tactic only used when the ship being attacked was to be intact. They were to be boarded, slaughtered, and the ship would be taken.

The Kidjoul were Uruk pirates. Despite the Uruk being unable to swim and capable of drowning, they were known for attacking merchant vessels, which is what Azia's ship looked like for the most part. And it was every bit as good as one now, since there was not a troop detachment on board.

"Oh no! We can't fight back!" Tia cried. "Captain, how could you let them

sneak up on us like that?!” Nidaja, in Alps’ body, looked up to see that the captain wasn’t there. Where had he gone? Then, she caught a glimpse of him, standing on the deck of the Uruk ship, shaking his head softly, and watching.

“Traitor!” Tia screamed. Rage filled Nidaja’s mind, and flamed within Alps’ body. They had been sold. This ship, the fastest in the sea, had a price. And now, it was to belong to Mannus. Nidaja growled savagely, and looked to Tia.

“I’m not surrendering.” she said through Alps’ now cold and determined voice. She knew Alps never sounded like this, but she could not afford to ‘be’ Alps right now. There wasn’t time for excuses. Tia nodded, and pointed to a small wooden door in a post that was bracing the middle mast.

“There... It’s Azia’s backup!” she said. “Alps you are not a fighter! What are you thinking?!” the grey female cried as Alps dashed from her side to the post, opening the door and finding a graceful, slender, curved long sword inside. Nidaja smiled within Alps’ body, and took the weapon. She knew it was fight or die silently, and her personality as a general would not allow the latter.

“You stay by the masts!” the general barked to Tia loudly. Surely Tia could tell this was not the Alps she was used to. And in a moment, she would really be able to tell.

“Please Alps! We can abandon the ship! We might have a chance if we get out of range of their arrows fast enough. With the ships locked together like this, they can’t sail straight!” the gray-furred female cried, rushing toward Alps. Nidaja growled to herself. Alps would not forgive her if she let Tia get killed!

“By the mast, Tia!” his voice boomed. In general, males of Alps’ station did *not* have that kind of domineering force. Tia, evidently stunned by that, did as she was told, drawing a shorter, slender blade to defend herself. The other crew members moved to the opposite side of the ship, wanting to avoid the now slowly and ominously boarding clay-toned-and-scented orc troops. Their multiple glowing crystal eyes were yellow and beady with determination and lack of any will but their dark masters. They wore leather armor, which would perhaps prevent them from sinking if they went overboard, but it was highly polished. This group was designed to be successful at what it did.

“Get off our boat.” growled Alps. The crew all snapped their heads to the side and looked. It was common knowledge what had happened in Kishu Valley, so their faces lit up. Alps, to them, was a hero, as genuinely hapless as he seemed. And Alps’ body with Nidaja’s mind was about what they would expect of that hero. Nidaja growled softly to herself again. She was really messing up now. Still, it was because she had to. Tia would understand. Alps would understand.



"It's a slave boy." came the captain's voice. "Not worth standing in the way of your acquisition, to be sure. Do as you wish to them." he conceded. Alps took grip of the sword. Nidaja's grip. The body was a little stockier than hers, but as she put herself into a mode to fight, she didn't feel that the differences would impede her. The first two golem-like Uruk attacked immediately, rushing from the gangplank they put up, and Nidaja's strokes fell with the violent speed and motion of a flag beaten by a hurricane. The general-in-slave's body snapped back, pushing off the deck with Alps' strong legs, and landed on the gangplank, making it impossible for her to be attacked from the sides. As another Uruk pirate jumped onto the gangplank, he was cut down, caught while trying to balance himself. As he splashed into the water, Nidaja mirthfully wondered if Uruk could feel cold.

She then charged the Uruk ship. She wanted to protect Tia and the others. She knew Alps would risk his own body in this way, and didn't feel any shame in doing it for him. Onto the orc ship she landed, hopping down from the ladder-accessed gangplank, and she danced along the railing of the ship with rapid, well balanced steps. Some things she did not need magic to accomplish. Her goal was made suddenly very clear.

The captain shrieked in terror, as Alps, under Nidaja's intense persuasion, launched himself at the traitor. With a spin before even touching the deck, the now fleeing captain found his mind now separated from his body. Unfortunately for him, his mind wasn't getting oral sex in another body; it merely fell with his head into the ocean. Nidaja spun around on Alps' heel, and found that the slave's muscles made for easy fighting. He was strong, but not so stocky as to be ungainly. Facing her attackers, Nidaja saw a dead orc lay at Tia's feet. She was mercilessly hacking it, scattering crystal eyes as Alps was faced with the remaining ones climbing aboard to protect the ship.

It was at this time that Nidaja realized how outnumbered they really were. A dozen orcs poured from the cabin, bristling with anger and weaponry. The general had faced tough odds, but never on the ocean. She at least had the grim satisfaction that the captain paid for his crime. There was a brief moment of reflection, where the orcs realized that they had been unexpectedly boarded, and then, chaos.

Nidaja was a very highly trained fighter, and did not know defeat well, especially one on one. But these odds were different. Now, it became necessary to use the Uruk's numbers against them, as she had done several times before. They would hold back attacks from the back of a group so as not to hit their other soldiers, so Nidaja knew to fight close quarters, pressing to any small extension of the group. Corners, wedges, anything where the group had to stand aside to avoid accidentally harming a smaller section of the group they fought in.

This tactic worked well, Alps, under the general's control, masterfully dropped several orcs while the crew of his own boat moved around quickly on the boat behind him. At first, Nidaja didn't know what they were doing, but then, it suddenly became clearer. They tore pieces of the thick railing down off the sides of the boat and made gangplanks, and with clubs, axes, and sharp barnacle scrapers at the end of long poles, the crew attacked. Seeing this slave fighting the Uruk pirates alone and winning filled the untrained sailors with pride, and lifted their morale. They stormed the opposing ship with a ferocity Nidaja had felt in her own heart toward the orcs but had seldom seen in others.

The Alps-bound general took advantage of the brief confusion of the Uruk sailors as their ship was boarded, and began hewing them apart as rapidly as she could, bolting in a dead run from one end of the deck to the other, trimming their ranks as more of them filed out of the cabin. While their ship was great for boarding another ship, holding many troops, the deck wasn't big enough to hold many at once, so at any given time, there could not be more than about ten or twelve outside the cabin.

Nidaja became aware of this fact and that with the arrival of the merchant sailors, she, in the form of a slave, now held the deck. Tia began to squeal ecstatically when it was obvious what had just happened. The Uruk never expected to be boarded. They weren't ready for it. Not more than ten minutes of one-sided murdering later, the waters churned with the grayish-blue goo that counted for blood in those magically generated bodies. Once every clay-like orc body had been thrown overboard, and the captain's body had been staked onto the Uruk ship's mast with a spike from the front of the orcish vessel, Alps and Tia and the rest of the crew rested. A few of them had been injured in the fighting, but those who were hurt felt sure they would make it.

As things calmed, the crew returned to Azia's ship, and Alps and Tia were left on the Uruk vessel. It would take a while for them to pry their boat free of the orcish ramming ship. Alps looked to Tia, and knew for certain that she must know something was up. The general had fought with all the skill she had. Tia just threw her arms around him, kissing him desperately about the face and muzzle and lips. The general melted, and had Alps kiss her back adoringly and approvingly. They did this for a little while, and Nidaja felt Alps becoming excited again, just as painfully and needful and erect as before. He could go again. Even after that fight, muscles sore, heart pounding. Tia groped him longingly, and smiled as she looks up into his eyes, in a way that told Nidaja that there was a reward for acting that way. Did Tia really expect that from Alps? She wasn't even questioning it.

"What do we do now? Should we head back to Diera?" Tia asked. "Nita and Azia would want to know about this betrayal. Nidaja would need to be warned," she stated. Alps blushed a little, at the subject of Nidaja coming up. He smiled, and shook his head.

“No... We continue on.” Nidaja said in Alps’ voice. “We have a mission to complete, and then we can tell them all about it when we get back.” he churred. Tia nodded softly, and looked to the orcish ship.

“What do we do with this?” she asked.

“We loot it, then set it ablaze and down to the ocean floor.” Nidaja growled happily from her host slave wolf. Tia giggled and bounced on her heels again, in a manner that Nidaja was becoming rather fond of. “Let’s head below deck. It’ll take a couple hours for the crew to free us.” she said.

Below deck, they found that the orcs had kept it very utilitarian. There were barrels with food, which was not of a sort that Nidaja even cared to discuss, and there were a few trunks with weapons and armor, and utility equipment for the care of the ship. In one of the quarters though, which was the only one with a lamp in it, there was a chest with silver, gold, and a single cloudy gem, very cold to the touch.

This was the only thing Nidaja cared about.

“Tia.” came Alps’ voice, as Nidaja called her over. “Look.” The crystal was held out by Alps’ still grayish blood-covered hands.

“What is that? A jewel?” she asked, touching it. “Oh! It’s freezing!” she said loudly. Nidaja shook Alps’ head negatively.

“It’s a Shadowfall crystal.” she said. Tia gasped loudly at it, as if it might bite her. Alps had been trapped and feared lost for good within one of these dreaded magical prisons. The crystal glowed with a deep violet light that made it appear as if it were literally shining darkness. In a brighter place than this cargo hold, it might indeed *have* been shining darkness, obscuring itself from the light. This was the darkest force known to all the tribes of Amani. It was Mannus’ only solution for the powerful Letai.

“We should take it back to Luna. If there are other priestesses trapped in this, then she might know what to do with it.” the grey-furred female said brightly. Nidaja looked at it, turning it over and over in Alps’ hand. Alps had freed the priestesses, and himself. Would the priestesses make Alps go into the crystal to free others? Nidaja would not want him to take that kind of ridiculous risk! What if his freeing himself and the others was a fluke? What if he only did it because that crystal was old or damaged? Still, it would be Alps’ decision to make, so she put the crystal back into the chest, and did another cursory check for anything worth removing from the ship.

The check turned up very little. Some coins, some raw metal for smithing,

and a few books that Nidaja knew Misty would want to look at. After removing these, Tia and the Nidaja-possessed-Alps went back to Azia's ship, and gave what assistance they could in separating the two ships. In places, it took sawing off part of Azia's ship to detach the spikes. It took a couple of hours, but as the sky became a black tapestry of endless sparkling stars, the ship was once again on its way, the blazing remains of their attacker's ship drifting away with the former captain of their own ship still staked to the crumbling mast.

Below deck, Nidaja undressed and looked at Alps' body in a thin plate of silver that hung nailed to the cabin wall. She turned sideways, then to the other side. It was so odd looking at Alps' body through his eyes. Nidaja caressed over his tummy, searching for the scars she could now feel. How had she missed so many of them before, holding him as he dozed safe in her arms? Why had he never told her all the things that happened? It surely would have helped him to let someone know. But as she traced line after line under his fur, Nidaja knew that Alps didn't need those memories anymore, and there was no reason to outright intentionally relive them.

The general closed Alps' eyes for a moment as she caressed his sheath. Fur bristled and tingling ensued. She snapped his eyes back open and swallowed. She found herself getting aroused both from her own touch, and the thought of touching Alps intimately. His mind was not in this body, but this was still his body, and she wanted to pleasure it. Rose tinted that white-furred muzzle that gazed back at her in the mirror. Alps' body was quickly becoming noticeably and physically aroused. Surely Alps was exploring her body the same way, as Misty and Nita tried to figure out what was going on elsewhere in the castle. Nidaja began to softly stroke the favored appendage that she had never had such an in-depth opportunity to explore.

A click of the door latch made Nidaja gasp through Alps' muzzle, and he turned, looking over his shoulder from the mirror as Tia stood there, a look of surprise on her face. That expression melted, however, as she slid up behind the white lupine and embraced him. Nidaja gritted his teeth, and shuddered a bit. That was something rather embarrassing to get caught doing, but then again, Tia seemed to be none-the-wiser about Alps being inhabited by the general. Nidaja chuckled softly, and crooned,

"Mmm... Just doing a bit of grooming and checking for new scratches and the like from the fight." he said. Tia pulled 'Alps' with her from the corridor with the mirror, over to the large, heavy-looking bed that could only belong to Azia. Nidaja swallowed again. After that fight, she had been feeling a bit wiped out, but the surge of arousal that swept through that white-furred frame the fatigue of battle was whisked away like straw in the wind of a coming storm. Tia forced Alps back to the bed and onto his back, his legs hanging over the side, as she slowly undressed in front of the bed before him. Nidaja started to sit up, and then remembered the role she was supposed to be playing. Alps would not have just sat back up. He would take what was to come willingly, and non-aggressively.

He was a slave, at least, for the moment, he still was.

"You were very valiant and strong, Alps." Tia's soft voice stroked over him. "You should definitely be rewarded." she churred in finality, undressed fully now, her youthful, petite grey form towering over his prone body. Nidaja inhaled deeply through the black nose of her host, and felt the throbbing ache of heightened arousal. Alps' erect shaft lay against his tummy in this position, and Nidaja found to her amazement that it was sensitive to ANY touch, not even just sexually intended ones. The feel of Alps' tummy fur under that swollen flesh was enough to illicit pleasure.

"I did what I had to in order to protect you and Azia's ship and crew." Nidaja whispered through Alps suddenly parched mouth. Was it always like this for males, she wondered? Tia got onto the bed, on all fours, with Alps' body stretched beneath hers. Nidaja released a hot breath, tilting her head back, exposing Alps' throat to the young female. Every inch of Alps' body wanted this. Nidaja's worries that she had been using Alps were drained away. This was so much pleasure that even if it *did* exhaust him, he'd be grateful.

"I didn't ask for your permission to reward you." Tia said, bringing her mouth to Alps'. Nidaja felt a pang of surprise. Sure, this was Alps' body, but no one she could think of had ever talked her down that way. It sent a chill through her, and she decided to remain as silent as possible, so as not to give herself away more. She would have to be as submissive in nature as Alps really was, especially for someone who had known him far longer than Nidaja had. They practically grew up together, after all. Nidaja nodded, and Tia brought her teeth to the side of his soft neck, biting gently, and then releasing, as she arched back, going up to her knees. Her slender, elegant fingers curled around that thick, turgid member and began to stroke slowly up and down, gliding just from softness, not needing any lubricant. Tia had already groomed, but it became obvious very quickly that her tidying up had been in vain. There was no spotless way to do what he was getting ready to do.

Alps arched his back into her touch as that hand slid up and down slowly, and a trickle of warm pre ran a rivulet up her taught, velvety tummy. Tia's hair always cascaded over her eye on one side, so one mischievous eye peered back at Nidaja with a gaze she knew was meant for Alps. The younger girl would enjoy this perhaps even more than Nidaja was about to. There was desperate hunger in those eyes. Nidaja felt a flare of heat all through that sex-tormented body as Tia brought the sensitive tip of that aching flesh to her wet folds, and pressed it in a few inches, groaning loudly, as she trembled over him.

It was completely different from the oral sex. Filling her slowly as she slid down his iron-hard shaft was like nothing Nidaja had ever felt, and she moved her hands to Tia's shoulders to give her shaking hands something to do as the pleasure welled within her. The white lupine's sack drew tighter to his body

involuntarily. Nidaja gritted her teeth, not wanting to give up Alps' seed just yet. She could not give in until Tia had hers. Alps would not allow himself to. But it was so intense! Nidaja threw back her host's head as Tia finally hit bottom, her wet mound sloppily grinding into the root of Alps' shaft, hard and needful.

"Already so on edge, Alpsie?" came Tia's enticing whisper. "Wanna just give in?" she teased. The general flexed those powerful leg muscles, holding back, as that slender, petite body started gliding back and forth over her friend's prone body. Those strong masculine hands moved to her waist as she hilted against and again, taking him in as deep as possible each and every time. She held herself close to him, still on all fours, her arms spread out a bit, her breasts, capped in rock-hard tits, dragging over his chest, tracing their own furrows in his fur. Nidaja began reflexively rolling Alps' hips as the pleasure continued to build. There was no preventing the building of this intense pleasure without forcing Tia to stop, which Nidaja knew Alps would never dare to do.

The general, trapped within a body that was feeling pleasure she didn't yet know how to control, squirmed almost violently under Tia as she started to increase her pace, her muzzle close to his, panting heavily, crying out softly from time to time whenever she stroked her clit just right against the grinding base of his shaft. She began to thump her hips hard into his as she backed over him hard, and cast herself forward again, pitching herself hard enough that she now had to be held by the shoulders to keep her on her friend's twitching, throbbing member.

"Mmnh! Oh love... Tia, I - I can't hold it!" came Nidaja's desperate warning in Alps' strained, hot voice.

"Then don't." came a rather savage growl from Tia as she slammed herself down that thick, intruding shaft. "Mmmph! Give it to me! Tell me! Tell me when you're cumming!" she cried, hugging Alps tighter. "I love feeling you inside me, oh Alps!" she cried, rutting against him harder and faster now. Nidaja's control over Alps' body was not even close to being enough to hold back now. A hot flash went through his body and Nidaja felt a hard jet empty into Tia's bouncing, pitching, and grinding sex.

"Nnggaahh! Cumming!" croaked Alps, as his hips hunched up against Tia's rigidly. Another wave, then another, each pulse fired deep into that soaking channel. Tia squealed loudly, as that thick essence splashed violently around inside her, pressed back out of her sex, into Alps' lap from her heavy, rapid pelvic stroking. Yes, this was definitely nullifying any grooming that had taken place. The wet, messy splattering of their hips colliding through Alps' climax only got wetter as Tia seized up, and wailed, her own tangy fluids spilling into Alps' lap. Nidaja had never realized how easy it was for Alps to tell one of his friends had climaxed until now. And it only made the severity of that male climax greater.

The general growled softly, the rage of passion and sexual lust overtaking her, within Alps' capable body. She reached around and grabbed Tia's rump, pulling her down against him, and rolling suddenly, pressing her to the mattress of that large, comfortable bed. Tia squealed, and gasped, as Alps growled with Nidaja's confidence over the slave's friend. She had *not* expected that. Nidaja didn't care. Tia had pleased him both times so far, it was the general's turn to have some fun and see what this body could do to a sweet little thing like Tia. The older female felt a bit dark about it, somewhat sinister, but it was so hot, even so!

Nidaja pulled Tia's knees up almost to Alps' shoulders, letting her legs loop over his arms, which she pressed heavily into the bed at Tia's sides. The grey-furred female's rump was held up to Alps' hips as she suddenly slammed deep into her, splashing their mixed fluids from her clenching sex lewdly. Nidaja growled again as Tia groaned pitifully in pleasure. White lupine hips began to piston rapidly, slapping loudly and wetly to Tia's, as she threw her arms up, and grabbed the pillow under her head, pulling at it desperately as her sex was ravaged over nine inches of unyielding lupine flesh. Tia wailed explosively as her hips rose to meet Alps'. She was climaxing very, very hard now!

"Aaahha.. Yes! Tia, cum on me - Oh YES - Squeeze me! Cum for me!" Nidaja panted and demanded aggressively in Alps' voice, as Tia's muscles strained, and hot wetness splashed all over the slave's lap, soaking his balls as they slapped against his friend's sex. Her hot juices splattered over the sheets and ran down her tail-base as Alps' shaft continued to almost abusively stroke back and forth within her. Nidaja felt the heat of lust flowing through her in a little bit different light than she was used to while lovemaking. Taking Tia felt very... Right. Somehow. Tia, of course, did not seem to mind, as she pitched and squirmed and screamed beneath Alps' relentless attack, her knees bent over the wolf's strong shoulders.

Nidaja panted heavily, enjoying such intense physical activity, and began to feel the now familiar throb of an approaching male climax. Tia put her hands around Alps' back, as if trying to control his speed, but to no avail. Alps continued letting her have it at a dizzying pace. Tia's body seized again, and her sex clenched tightly around that endlessly thrusting rod. That extra tightness pulled Alps' body ever-more-rapidly toward climax.

"Nnng - Yeah... Tia, I'm getting'... close again..." Nidaja panted hotly, as she pounded that tingling, burning shaft in and out of Tia's now convulsing sex. Tia released a few stifled words, as if unable to respond at all for a moment, while Nidaja growled happily, continuing to serve Tia with feral rutting, pushing the young grey-furred female's shoulders deeper and deeper into the mattress. This position offered Alps a lot of control. Finally, the words being pushed out of Tia started to become intelligible.

“Ahh gahhd! Cumming - Again!” she screamed, before looking with pleading eyes to Alps face, which wore the aggressive, superior expression of the emerald general. “Uhh... Taste - Hhnh! I want - Taste you, Alps!” she finally managed to blurt out. Nidaja was suddenly overcome with an even more domineering desire, not so much to do something to Tia, but to see Tia do something to Alps, to that body which Nidaja had made love to so many times. This wonderful pleasure that burned all over his young body had to be sated!

Alps pulled out of Tia as her sex relaxed a bit, recovering a bit from that intense climax. His throaty growl of pleasure was commanding of Tia, as he slid back onto his knees, and reached down, pulling her by her shoulders, onto her knees. She slid back a little, getting onto all fours, taking that soaking wet, twitching, swollen member in her graceful fingers again, and stroking slowly, as she brought it to her muzzle. Alps’ hand came down to her face, and caressed her forward, coaxingly, as Nidaja let her take the white lupine’s shaft deep into her slender, short muzzle.

“Mmmmmh... Yesss...” Alps crooned softly in his soft, feathery male voice. “Tia, that’s wonderful...” he churred, hanging his head a bit, gazing at his lover’s face through narrow eyes. She ‘mmm’ed as she took him in again, vibrating her lovely voice all the way down his shaft. Nidaja pictured how she must look, so subservient when she did this to Alps. This is what it looked like from his point of view. It was so exotic and serving. She tightened Alps’ legs, soaking up the pleasure, having trailed back from trigger-point moments ago by the change in position. Tia didn’t seem to mind the delay though, as she continued to look up at Alps’ face with a dutiful and loving expression, that crest of gray hair covering one eye, the other looking back innocently, and almost worshipping.

Nidaja groaned hotly through Alps’ parched lips, as the pressure in that young female’s mouth dropped while she lustfully swallowed back her own juices from that throbbing shaft. Alps’ sudden aggressive and dominant behavior had apparently forced Tia into a submissive mood, as she probably took when she was with Azia, Nidaja thought. The thought of it was merely reflection for a moment, before the sensation of wanted release started to prick down Alps’ spine, and his sack started to draw tight again. Tia began to speed up a bit, letting her hand trail her muzzle again skillfully, adding length to her strokes, making it seem that she was taking him in deep again. Nidaja gritted her teeth tightly.

“HShhh... Yes...” she hissed through Alps’ teeth, “Close again, keep going - Don’t stop...” Alps’ raspy voice growled. Tia moaned again softly, and continued just as she was, neither speeding up nor slowing down. She sucked loudly on the tip each time she pulled her muzzle almost all the way off of Alps’ shaft, and then slurped his length back in, the room filling with the steady “Slilck... Slilck... slilck-slilck-slilck!!” that told the heated story of the white lupine’s intense



pleasure. The ribbed texture of the roof of Tia's mouth continued strumming over his shaft perfectly. Alps' muscles tightened, Nidaja feeling that tingling getting stronger and stronger. "Yes... Yes... Ahh... Ahhh..." The lupine general felt the heat welling in Alps' body, right under his navel, it seemed. It was such a signature sensation - Nothing else at all like it. Nidaja hung her head, moaning through Alps' lips. "Oh love, Tia - I'm... I..!" Alps threw his head back, and held both sides of Tia's face, Nidaja feeling a surge through every cell of that oh-so-ready body.

Tia flinched a bit, with a wet "Gurk!" as Nidaja felt an almost painful explosion from the tip of that jerking, burning hot shaft. The young female started reflexively swallowing, hard and fast, as she was given a bit more than she was ready for in between breaths as she was. Nidaja felt that sinking sensation, as if her entire body was being turned inside out, expelled into Tia's willing mouth. The general felt almost faint within this slave's body as he spent himself completely over his childhood friend's palette.

Nidaja opened her eyes a little, gazing down at Tia as she suddenly popped free of Alps' shaft, pumping her hand over its still pulsing length, her mouth open, catching the still remarkably copious opalescent streamers of his thick seed over her tongue and the bridge of her muzzle as she desperately tried to catch her breath, painting her muzzle liberally in the process before making Nidaja cringe as she took that thick member back into her steamy mouth, swallowing down the last weak jets of his essence, her tongue grinding the tip of his sensitive shaft. Nidaja shuddered violently at that sensation again, but did not put up a complaint, as Tia took every drop she could draw from him.

Alps' body then fell backwards, involuntarily, as she felt as if that entire body sank as if it were falling through air choked with feathers, tickling that satisfied form all the way back down to some soft, warm, safe landing place. Everything became muted, dark, and wonderful for what felt like only a few minutes, but was apparently much longer.

The general realized she must have blacked out because when she came to her senses, and finally took stock in what was going on, Tia was holding Alps, stretched out at his side, her head on his broad, strong chest. Nidaja rubbed that white-furred head a bit, and smiled at Tia. Surely Alps would not have minded that she did this. She closed her eyes slowly, and finally let sleep take her in the body of her lover.

**Sirius, Book III**  
*The Essence*

*Comments or Questions?*

Contact Alps: [sarsis@gmail.com](mailto:sarsis@gmail.com)

Or just drop a note at: <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/sarsis/>

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**Chapter 4**

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The town of Jalana stretched out before Alps seemingly endlessly. He tugged at the straps to Nidaja's leather armor uncomfortably. He was not used to wearing this stuff, even if this body was used to it. He looked back to the boat, from which he was now departing. The trip had been almost completely uneventful after that now looted and charred Uruk ship they had happened across. They had been frightened at first, thinking that they might be overtaken, even on Nidaja's ship, but then it appeared to not even notice them, so Misha and Uri used a spyglass, and found it to be abandoned. They investigated it, and found nothing of value. There was orcish blood everywhere though, which seemed to satisfy Misha and Uri both. They set fire to it again, and watched as it finally sank, just to be sure. There were no other distractions to the journey though.

After their initial serving of the general, Misha and Uri let Nidaja have her space, bringing her supplies they said she usually needed. Alps did not argue, even if he didn't know what to do with the journals and maps that were brought to him. Many of these were hand written or drawn by Nidaja herself, apparently. While Alps didn't know what Nidaja would usually do with them in the privacy of her quarters, he took the hours and hours of time he had on the ship to read through them as best he could. He was still not very adept at reading and writing, so it took some time.

However, in reading these journals, Alps learned a lot about what Nidaja was doing as a general, and the kinds of strategies she would use, and her approach to the war. Nidaja, it seemed, originally felt that the only chance for her people in this war was to stave off the encroaching enemy, and fight small skirmishes to lead attention away from the major cities. The war, thus far, had been primarily about sacrifice. The slave could understand that. However, in the past few months, Nidaja had started looking at her tactics and her entire approach differently.

The victory at Kishu Valley, in those snowy mountains, had caused Nidaja to examine alternative strategy heavily. Attacking the enemy indirectly,

deception, and stealth and strike had become the general's obsession. And by the numbers, this plan was working. Alps learned, in looking through the maps, all the locations of major and minor orcish camps, and even orcish piracy routes, on sea or land.

Something that interested the white male, as he read Nidaja's notes, were references made to Letai treasures placed in a temple in Jalana. These were royal treasures, but were not being kept in Diera for some reason. In two cases, referring to this treasure, the word Letai came up. This peaked Alps' interest. Freeing the priestesses had given him a deep longing for knowledge of that lost race, because he now found himself heavily involved in very important events involving them. Despite the fact that he was already trailing behind his body, he had to know. He had to see what these treasures were.

And so, he found himself, in Nidaja's body, looking out over the docks, to the city of Jalana, which only months ago, he'd helped to save from destruction. He was secretly thankful that Misha and Uri had to remain behind with the boat. There were supplies they were procuring while they were here, and once they got those supplies they would accompany the general to the town of Luca, for reasons they had not been told. But, for the next few hours, Alps could move about and not have to try so hard to act exactly like Nidaja. He made a beeline for the local temple. He had to learn more.

It did not take too terribly long to reach the gates of the temple, but it was primarily an uphill walk, so the general, under direction of a slave's mind, panted and huffed as she pushed the ornately carved wooden gates open. The temple was mostly empty space inside, domed all the way to the top of the ceiling. It was very white within, and vines clung to the walls, inching their way to the ceiling, where there was an opening. Beneath this opening was a pond which was populated with lilies and flowers. A life temple. One of the few left. This was a remnant of the old Letai faith.

"Hello?" echoed Nidaja's voice. Normally so sure and secure, the general's voice, under Alps' control, seemed small and alone.

"General Nidaja? Is that you?" came a female's voice. Alps was not surprised to hear a female voice reply. Males did not run temples. Only a female could bear the power that came with being a life priestess, for only a female could bear new life.

"Yes, I have come to inspect... The things... That I left. Here in the temple." Alps rambled from Nidaja, feeling kind of stupid, suddenly. The general drew in a soft gasp as she finally found the location of that voice. In shimmering

robes somewhat similar to Luna's, sat a green-furred female lupine. She looked as if she could be related to Nita and Nidaja directly, even in her violet, expressive eyes. Alps realized, with a start, he had never even asked if Nidaja was Nita's only sister. This lovely girl had stepped out from behind one of the pillars which lined the walls of this circular wide-open space.

"You mean the relics?" came the girl's voice. "Yes, I still have them. They are within the altar. You are lucky you came today. I was going to go on a trip and you would not have been able to see them till I got back, you know." she said. Alps gazed at her through Nidaja's eyes. She looked about Nita's age, but was more slender, looking like she fasted a lot. She had wide, round spectacles perched on the bridge of her nose and laced behind her long, flowing hair. She looked like she should have her nose buried in a book, even more so than Misha. Alps, still trying to put on airs of being both military and royalty, held Nidaja's head high, and put her hands behind her back, patiently awaiting something, it seemed.

"You are looking well." Alps said in Nidaja's firm voice, trying a little harder, as it seemed this priestess, at the very least, was familiar with Nidaja. The girl looked at Nidaja for a little while, and then put both her hands behind her, mirroring the general. She seemed a little bashful all of a sudden, as she drew close. She obviously admired Nidaja, which made Alps a little more comfortable that this was not a sibling.

"I have been well..." she said softly. She moved over to an altar, and pushed hard on one of the stones that supported it. It slid inward with some difficulty, and then she pushed another. She did five stones in this fashion, in no particular order it seemed, and then she slid the top of the altar, an alabaster lined wooden top, to the side at a right angle, revealing a chamber inside.

There was a silk tapestry, rolled up, which had peculiar writing on it similar to the stuff Alps had seen Misty study, and there were a few coins and gems, but one object Alps didn't recognize, and had Nidaja's hand reach down to pick up, was a green-tinted mirror-shined sphere, about the size of an orange.

"Still obsessed with that one?" came the priestess' calm and soft words.

"What is it?" Nidaja said, Alps gritting his teeth, realizing that Nidaja might already know what it is, and that would have sounded peculiar.

"You ask me every time you pick it up, General, and I don't know any more now than I did a few months ago." she said, smiling wryly. "You seem nervous, General Razelle... Would you like one of my backrubs?" the younger

female asked. Alps gritted teeth again. Would Nidaja usually have refused, or would he stick out like cactus needles if he didn't accept? Alps cringed a bit. He didn't even know what the girl's name was! Would Nidaja have known? Surely she would! He began searching for some sign of what it might be.

"I think I shall take it with me this time. I know someone who could study it and tell me more." Alps murmured. He felt a little wrong about it, since he was technically using Nidaja to steal something, but it belonged to Nidaja, and if he asked to have Luna and Ceriss look at it, surely she would allow it. The priestess looked at Nidaja mischievously, and pushed the altar shut again, leaving the general holding the sphere. She hopped up onto the top of the altar, sitting cross-legged over it, the loincloth-like front of it spilling down the side of the base of the altar.

"Oh now, here I was looking forward to keeping it here a while for the good of the shrine. You would not want to take it and offer nothing in return, would you? The temple will feel so empty without your gift to keep us company, yes?" she said, kicking her foot casually. Alps swallowed reflexively. Was he cursed the same way in this body too? Or was he reading something into it that was not there? Either way, Nidaja smiled nervously.

"Ahh... Err... I am not sure that is such a good idea. It is a conflict of interest, is it not?" the general stammered. Alps felt that if she was NOT talking about sex, this would have been nonsensical, but if she was, it would at least bring those motives into the open and Alps could deal with them then. The response however, was not one he expected, and especially not one he wanted. The priestess wilted. She slid off the altar, and sat in the floor, looking away, silent.

"Oh no... I didn't mean it like that... I just..." Alps had Nidaja get onto her knees by the young priestess and hold her, just as he would have done if he had made some kind of misunderstanding that hurt her like this. She whimpered a little bit.

"I feel so foolish!" she cried, hugging Nidaja tightly now. "I didn't mean to offend you... I just... I believed what the regional matriarch said about you being ... Being..." She shook her head, "And now I've offended you! I spent a so much time studying to be a priestess, and now I can't get past this one trial. Any normal girl could do it..." she said dolefully. "But normal lives are not afforded those who dedicate their lives to healing. Just the same as those who lead the queen's army." she added, nodding to Nidaja. "So I thought, if I could share something of myself with anyone, anyone who would understand, you would be the safest to ask!"

Alps paused a moment to think about this. Having sex with Misha and Uri was one thing. Nidaja would readily take them anyway. But for Alps to be with a stranger, at least to him was not so acceptable. What would Nidaja say if she did not actually WANT to be with her? Nidaja's head turned toward the priestess. She seemed so visibly distressed. The general sunk her head a bit. Nidaja would have to understand. Alps was simply conditioned to respond in favor of those around him, even if it was not his body to do so. It was Nidaja's fault he was in this position anyway.

With this logic firmly in mind, Nidaja brought both hands to the girl's cheeks, and made her look into her violet eyes, the one thing that had not changed from Alps own body. There was a long pause as they looked into each other's eyes. Finally, Alps, through Nidaja, spoke.

"Priestess..." she said softly, as if only to break the tense silence that surrounded them like a tomb.

"Vahna." she said. Nidaja blinked. "Call me Vahna.. Remember? You don't have to be so official with me... We're friends." she elaborated. Nidaja nodded silently, still holding her face. A name. That was going to be helpful for what she was about to do. Alps leaned down, and pressed the general's lips tightly to Vahna's, eliciting a sharp gasp from the priestess, but she melted right into it, and slipped her hands around to the back of Nidaja's head, to hold her there. Alps felt that warm full body glow of arousal trickle through that strong, pain-free body. He stood back a bit, to give Vahna a chance to get out of the floor, surely not feeling as bad after that kiss.

And, indeed, she did not seem to feel bad at all, as she hopped back on the altar, sitting perched on the edge. Her green, fluffy, almost vulpine tail swished behind her merrily. Alps brought Nidaja's muzzle back to the young priestess', and kissed this time without drawing away again. It was a very long, passionate, and heated kiss, similar to any he might give to the one who was now doing the kissing under his guidance. How far would the priestess take this? What could it chance for Nidaja? Or for her?

Before Alps could consider this further, his mind was snapped back to the there and then, by the metallic 'chink' of two straps, one over each shoulder, of Nidaja's leather armor. It loosened on her, and she inhaled deeply, enjoying the improved flexibility. Alps was not at all used to wearing that stuff. So many times had he been relieved of clothing by others that it didn't even strike him as odd while Vahna unclasped the catches on the sides of the armor. It fell away easily with the last clasps undone and left Nidaja wearing a white cotton shirt and black

suede breaches. The mind of the white lupine felt the heat of blushing. Nidaja wasn't so shy, but at the moment, he felt the priestess was probably on all new territory, and would not notice.

Her hands came to Nidaja's chest, as she kissed her, and suddenly, Alps realized that they were in a completely public place. There were not even any doors to hide what was going on. If someone walked through the main gates, they would be exposed, enjoying one another.

"Shouldn't we move to somewhere more private?" Nidaja asked softly. Alps traced Vahna's lips deftly then, shivering a bit. For being unfamiliar, she was fast becoming very alluring to the wolf. The priestess shook her head softly.

"Mmm.. Nidaja, I thought you of all people would know exactly what I'm up to." she said, pinching Nidaja's hardening nipples through her soft shirt. Nidaja looked at Vahna blankly. Alps had no clue. He thought he was going to yet again get used for the pleasure of another lovely girl. There was a brief silence, before the younger girl spoke again. "Nidaja, this is a Letai life tap ritual." she churred softly. Alps still hadn't a clue, but nodded softly.

"So it doesn't matter that it's right out in the open, huh?" she asked.

"Of course not. It's considered bad manners for anyone to just stop and stare, though, if you are feeling shy. I was told that you were not at all shy about your body, General Nidaja." Vahna added. Finally, the nature of what the priestess was wanting became clearer. She needed Nidaja for a ritual, and for this particular one, she trusted the general to get it right.

"What should I do?" Alps asked via the general curiously. Vahna was the one who looked blankly at Nidaja.

"It's a life tap. Doesn't matter, as long as its great pleasure for us both." she said with a smile. "Oh my goodness, Nidaja, am I to believe you have *never* done this? Scandalous!" she chimed. Alps bowed the general's head sheepishly. "It's okay. Just do whatever you like to me, and I will take care of you, and it will be enjoyable for us both. Finish taking your clothes off." she said. Nidaja nodded obediently as Alps' heart raced. He shimmied out of the pants, and removed the shirt, and the white cotton and lace panties. He was glad to be out of them. He felt so wrong putting them on in the first place. Now, the female general's nude form was bare for Vahna, who busied herself in undressing. Her tail was really beating behind her now.

"Sit on the altar." came Nidaja's voice, as Alps decided to try to play her

closer to character. Nidaja would be in some control of what was going on, at least! The girl looked at her with a surprised expression, as she unclasped the loincloth-like skirt at her hip, letting it slip to the floor. She nodded briskly, slipping out of her iridescent shirt, and hopping up onto the altar again, sitting at its edge, gazing at Nidaja.

“Mmmm... Okay... I take it by you telling me where to sit you wish to start the ceremony?” she asked. Alps cringed inwardly. He had no idea what this ceremony was about, or what it was supposed to accomplish. Males were not brought into temples for this sort of thing. It was something that only a female would have any cause to know about. He nodded though, which seemed to satisfy (and in fact, elate) the priestess. Carefully, the general lowered herself before the priestess, not wanting to go too fast to doing the wrong thing. If Vahna thought this was Nidaja’s first time, she might helpfully point out if she were making a mistake. Alps moved Nidaja’s warm lips to the pert, youthful, smallish breasts of the slender priestess, and took a nipple into her steamy muzzle, tweaking it slowly, but very firmly between her teeth, and teasing with her tongue. Vahna did not protest at all, as she slapped her hands behind her on the altar for support, arching her back, and instinctively spreading her legs from the rush of pleasure that Nidaja knew now all too well this was causing her. She squeaked with a tight chest, almost unable to make an audible noise at all.

Vahna was not able to touch Nidaja in any way just yet, which was okay for her at the moment. Alps would have Nidaja give Vahna as much pleasure as she could stand. It seemed a rather pleasant task to take up the time he had to wait for Misha and Uri, at least. And, he would be letting Nidaja perform a function that Nidaja would have been expected to do. Nita might even be pleased at the extent he went to play as her sister.

Nidaja, under Alps’ compulsion, continued to suckle softly at the nipple she had taken, while she brought her other hand to the opposite breast, and began massaging it slowly, the opposite nipple caught between her fingers, tugged gently in the massage. After a few moments of this, the priestess issued a guttural moan, followed by soft, shaky words.

“Mmmh - Nidaja... by the light... You have... Made love to a female before.” she said softly. Alps reflexively nodded, not thinking about whether or not Nidaja would want that to be common knowledge. It didn’t matter much at the moment. Vahna’s legs wrapped around Nidaja’s waist, pulling the priestess’ hips up against the general’s tummy tight enough that Alps could feel her wet folds soaking the general’s tummy fur slowly. At least it seemed that he was doing this correctly, as much as expected.



Slowly, Alps moved Nidaja's body up and down a bit, bending her knees, and standing again, rubbing her tummy against Vahna's weeping, burning sex. Nidaja stooped down until the base of her breasts rested on the priestess' youthful hips, and then up until her pubic region nearly meshed against hers. Nidaja could not help but to breathe long, heavy breaths as she did this, increasing the feel of passion here. She did not turn toward the door at all to see if someone was watching. Alps was completely intent now on what the general was doing.

As more and more high-pitched squeaks of pleasure were dragged from the priestess, Alps finally moved both of Nidaja's hands to her legs, and parted them, releasing the general from her grasp. He looked down Nidaja's tummy. It was rather wet already with the girl's growing lust. The intensity was reaching a point where Alps felt it was time to give the priestess something that he'd been taught very well to give.

He lowered Nidaja's muzzle, bringing the general to her knees in front of the altar, and touched the general's lips to that soaking wet sex, parting the priestess' swollen folds with her muzzle, and sliding her tongue from the bottom of Vahna's glistening slit to the top, flicking her clit hard with that last inch of tongue, making her gasp and squeak very loudly, falling flat onto her back on the altar, her head bent even further back as it rested over the other side.

"Oh my..." she groaned deeply, "You actually do that!" Alps was finding again and again that this was not a terribly common pleasure. He smiled, and opened the general's jaws, cupping the tight mound of the youthful Vahna, and just plunging her tongue suddenly and deeply into her tight channel. She shrieked loud enough that it startled Alps, and Nidaja coughed and sputtered, her muzzle instantly flooded as the general inhaled with Alps' surprise at the loud noise. "Don't stop!" cried Vahna immediately. Alps composed himself, and cupped Nidaja's muzzle tightly to the now squirming female's convulsing sex, and jammed Nita's sister's long tongue deep into the grunting priestess.

Vahna gripped the edges of the altar, and released a long, hoarse moan of obviously torturous pleasure as Nidaja's tongue hooked inside the younger female's clenching channel. Again and again, Alps lustfully drew out her sweet nectar, holding her legs tightly now, to keep her from bucking into Nidaja's teeth. She even gave a bit of an assertive nip to the region around the priestess' sex on occasion, just to give her a start, before finally drawing back, panting, sputtering a bit, as Vahna gasped and heaved through her recovery.

The mind-trapped slave hopped up onto the altar with Vahna, and straddled her in a neat sixty-nine position, holding the edges of the altar with her

hands, and her feet just over the other side. The priestess immediately buried her muzzle into Nidaja's sex, stabbing rapidly with her hard-licking tongue, delving as deep as she could it seemed, and dragging the full length of it over the general's now burning clit. It was immediately almost more pleasure than Nidaja could bare, and she seized up just a bit, before resuming her assault on the priestess' sex, making her gasp, and slow down her attack on Nidaja's soaking sex.

This gave Alps an idea. He could, through the level of pleasure he was providing to Vahna, control just how much she was able to give to Nidaja. He grinned almost cruelly to himself, and let the priestess start licking again, Nidaja lowering, pressing her body against that of her younger companion. The general hung her head, and rolled her hips, feeling the surge of pleasure like a small explosion in her body with each caress of that curious, learning tongue. It didn't have to be skilled, though. Alps was not used to pleasure inside Nidaja's body, and Vahna was not having any trouble at all getting the job done. As soon as he felt the pulse of growing climax, Alps would then use both hands to hold the priestess' sex open, and ravage her clit with a hot, long velvety tongue, and probe deeply, hooking and suckling loudly on her honey-pot, forcing her to stop pleasuring Nidaja's sex, as she very quickly neared climax herself. Nidaja would then let off, giving her time to recover just a little, and begin licking the general's sex again, rolling her tongue against that tingling bud of her clit, and grooming Nidaja's juices deep inside with her expressive tongue.

Alps performed this cycle several time, letting Vahna bring the general painfully close to climax, a little harder to resist each time, and each time, Nidaja forces her back by bringing her rapidly, skillfully almost to climax. This might be a learning experience for the priestess, but Alps knew how to do this very confidently, and it was the one thing he had no trouble pretending to be Nidaja-like about.

The general began tensing up as she let Vahna bring her close, so very close to climax. Alps felt like every fiber of his being were lit on fire, and he would let it almost consume him completely within Nidaja's now blazing hot body, and she would drive the girl back with her intense oral stimulation of her own in just a few short moments. Pulse... Pulse... Pulse... Her it came... Nidaja cast her head down, cupping Vahna's sex completely as she buried her long lupine tongue into that grasping, pulling sex. She began hammering and hooking her tongue, dolloping loudly and splashing those plentiful juices all over the altar and the base of Vahna's tail, and to Alps' shock, this time, the priestess withstood it. Vahna kept right on licking, loudly and messily, as Alps put all his skill into the pleasure he gave the priestess.

Alps groaned through Nidaja's lips as he tried desperately to distract the priestess again, but to no avail. Finally, the last hot pulse of energy seared through Nidaja's body and Alps knew even if she jumped off the altar completely to avoid that wonderful tongue, she'd be climaxing already. There was just no stopping it. At first, the slave didn't know why the priestess was suddenly resisting the general's tongue, and then it became perfectly obvious.

Vahna howled almost deafeningly into Nidaja's shuddering mound. Nidaja's entire body went with it, causing the priestess' howl to be silenced with a wet splash to her face, which coaxed her to return to pleasuring the general with her tongue again. The girl had forced herself to keep licking because she knew Nidaja would bring her all the way to climax. She forced Nidaja to make her pop! The general was in no mental state to feel indignant about control being stripped from her though, as the most intense, deep, full body orgasm Alps had ever felt ripped Nidaja from the inside out, and then right back in. Between her sloppy licking and now weak undulating motions, Vahna continued to whimper, and even squelch out a raspy scream, as Alps forced Nidaja's almost unwilling body to keep pleasuring the girl. Finally, the intense release folded Alps' mind, and he grunted through Nidaja's parched lips, and dropped on top of the priestess, rest on top of her, face pressed to her trembling thigh. Vahna too, it seemed, needed rest now, just caressing Nidaja's soaking rump as the two rested together on the top of the altar. Alps still had absolutely no idea what that had to do with the Letai religion. What kind of ceremony was that supposed to be? He didn't care, though. Not now. It felt perfect.

Alps stayed there with Vahna as Nidaja for almost half an hour more, before they both shakily got up, and started to dress again. Vahna didn't talk much, handing Nidaja the sphere she had intended to take. She obviously had permission to take it, since it was hers, but it still felt a lot like a reward to Alps, and that felt good.

Misha and Uri met up with 'Nidaja' only a few blocks away from the temple, and both could tell by scent what Nidaja had been up to, though neither of them were forward enough to ask about it. Or perhaps they knew Nidaja might be expected to do something like that on a temple visit. Either way, no questions made things easier for Alps until he could get the general to a stream to wash off properly, and enjoy, for that small leg of the journey, the scent of his encounter within a temple where males did not generally tread.

**Sirius, Book III**  
*The Essence*

*Comments or Questions?*

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Or just drop a note at: <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/sarsis/>

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**Chapter 5**

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Alps inhaled deeply, still successfully hiding in the general's body. His mind was still very much his own, and he was still in desperate pursuit of his own body, controlled by the owner of this body. Nidaja intended to exact a serious and terrible revenge on the slave's former mistress. His intention now was just to prevent that, not wanting Nidaja to do bad things for him.

Distracting himself from these thoughts, he held up the mirror polished green metallic sphere he had picked up with Nidaja's authority from the temple in Jalana. What was it exactly? A Letai relic? What could this have been for? What was Nidaja's interest in it? He began to feel a little worse about taking it. If he lost it or it was a dangerous artifact, it might very well irritate Nidaja that he had it. It was too late to go back and hand it over though. Alps was already en route to Seravi, then to Luca. It would be a couple days yet before they arrived, but he was sure they would not, at the pace they were making, be too far behind his body. Had Tia found out that it was not him in his body yet? Had Nidaja done anything with Tia that he would have enjoyed as well?

He pondered so much in his meandering thoughts that he failed to notice Misha and Uri had fallen asleep as he stared with Nidaja's eyes at that perfect sphere. He had been unable to explain its purpose to them but Nidaja apparently would not have been able to either. The light outside was failing as the coach he was in, drawn by large beasts which resembled heavy hexapod ferrets, thundered toward the town far in the distance over open prairie.

The ferret things were called slinks, due to their odd but smooth style of running. Each weighed about 700 pounds, and four of them pulled the coach. They were solid black, unnaturally strong, highly intelligent if not basely sentient, and, to top it all off, poisonous. Alps had not seen many of them in Diera because on the island itself it was illegal to keep them due to the persistence of accidental mistaken feeding. The mistake being they ate their handlers from time to time. It was rumored this only happened when they were mistreated, however.

Now, they pulled the carriage evenly, though it lurched from side to side a

bit as the wheels hit ruts in the road. Alps put away the sphere and leaned back a bit, taking out the other item that had held his interest, rolling it around in Nidaja's hand. The Shadowfall crystal. The cold feeling to his touch told him that there was still someone in there. Seven hundred years they had remained trapped in this thing. He could almost not bear to have them trapped any longer. What kind of person was it? Was it someone's daughter or mother or best friend? Their friends were long gone, and the world had changed so much. Alps would be bringing this person back in a time of endless war and they were on the losing side.

Yet the crystal, the Shadowfall, the Letai... all these things held some meaning for him. The reason for all of this that still eluded him prickled at his senses continually. Maybe the reason his mother left him. It might explain why he had the effect on his friends that he did. The truth was worth the fear of going back into the pre-designed wastelands of the Shadowfall to bring those imprisoned out. Even saving one person gave the wolf's life meaning. More meaning than being a slave ever did, to be certain. He closed his eyes and held the object in his hand. Nidaja's body was not his own. He could not feel the seams of the crystal the way he could his own hands. He could not tell where it opened or even if it opened.

Alps looks out of the small square window of the coach he was in, lumbering long in the low light. The handler was driving late into the evening because the slinks were nocturnal. They would have their best running on the late evening hours. A late start in the morning would have them in range of Seravi by late afternoon the next day. He would be in a place he recognized. The orphanage Alps had been given to as a child was there. He closed his eyes. Had Nidaja seen his memories there? Had she seen his first real wound inflicted upon him?

The reflection on these serious matters made the lupine restless. He found it nearly impossible to sleep. He spoke softly to the crystal, concentrating very hard as if the mind ensnared there could hear him if he tried hard enough. "I will get you out. I know it's dangerous but I cannot in clear conscience leave you there. Hold on a little longer. When I get my mind and body whole again, it will be time for you to live again." He murmured.

As he leaned back, the wolf looked to his other side, to see the scenery out the other window. He expected, as it had been for most of the afternoon and evening, it would be the same as on the other side. Hilly grassland. He jumped, almost dropping the crystal when his eyes focused on something between him and the window. He clutched his chest, trying to keep his heart from bursting right out. The female fox, so lithe and graceful and silent, was sitting directly

beside him.

“You! Oh heavens you nearly killed me.” he hissed in Nidaja’s voice. It took him a moment to put his façade back up. He tugged at Nidaja’s leather armor a bit and stated in a stronger voice, still wavering from his surprise. “I am not even going to ask how long you have been there or how you got in, but please warn me next time.” After a moment of silent reflection, Alps watched the fox a bit longer. She wore a simple black robe with silver trim. He recognized it as one of Misty’s. It occurred to the wolf trapped in Nidaja’s form that he hadn’t seen this vixen at all for a long time after she was released, and he had wondered where she had been.

As usual, the lady vulpine wasn’t speaking. She looked ahead, enjoying the ride it seemed. Alps rode in silence for a while as those unblinking silver eyes gazed ahead, as if into nothingness. The disguised slave found himself wondering if the vixen could see, or if she was aware in some other fashion completely. After a few moments of silence, he finally spoke, very softly in Nidaja’s normally strong, dulcet tone.

“I have taken a brief sabbatical from my duties to tend to a matter of personal importance to the queen. Her servant –“ but in the middle of the sentence the vulpine turned her head rather sharply, looking into the general’s eyes in such a fashion that it sent chills up the wolf’s spine. It was a piercing gaze that seemed as if it could shatter a mirror. The fox spoke, not letting Alps finish speaking.

“You do not need to practice your story on me, consort.” Her tone was so rich and powerful and smooth that Alps felt immediately reverent. He gritted Nidaja’s teeth. Consort. The wolf had offered himself to this black and silver vixen when they first met, so of course she thought he was a consort, but that would mean that she also knew that his mind was in Nidaja. Was she watching when the mindwalk went awry? Nidaja’s voice crackled softly.

“You knew...” Alps looked over to the vixen, which was looking ahead. She nodded casually.

“Do my eyes frighten you?” she asked in a low and silky tone.

“I – No... I mean they are... unusual, sure. But I’m not afraid.” came Nidaja’s wavering voice.

“Do you know why you are not afraid of them?” she asked.

“No...” Nidaja’s voice replied.

“That is ignorance.” she stated. The way she said it was less like an insult, and more like the point to a lesson. Alps recoiled a little. He knew that the vixen was not especially a fan of him after his initial trip up, and she had been quick to establish her superiority from day one, but he remembered that she had said she would only talk when she needed to. The slave could not see how this needed to be said. He stated clearly in that feminine voice,

“That’s not especially helpful. Why are you following me? What do you want?” he had found himself speaking a little more dominantly by habit while in Nidaja’s form. He hoped he didn’t start doing it when he was back in his own body, but it was growing on him. Being dominant and strong was a very uplifting experience, and without all his old wounds reminding him that he was a slave, it was a lot easier to stay in character. There was a long silence. She seemed to be thinking. She always seemed to be thinking very carefully about what she was going to say.

“Do you really want to stop her?” Again she seemed so sure of what she was saying. Alps flinched at it. He had not told anyone exactly what he thought Nidaja was going to do, so the fact that the fox seemed to know startled him.

“Chana is *my* past. Nidaja does not need to commit murder for what cannot be changed.” Alps stated firmly, resigned to the fact that this vixen knew exactly what was going on. Another silence, her hands were on her knees, gazing forward, not turning to look at Nidaja’s form again. Perhaps it was easier like this for her, as she was not speaking to Nidaja, and knew it.

“Do you think you are the only one she’s ever hurt?” her voice careful and measured. Alps blinked at that. He had not really considered it. He only ever saw her harming him. She seemed respected in the community, but he knew that fear could look a lot like respect too.

“That does not mean that she should dirty her hands with a revenge killing.” Alps stated in that stronger tone.

“What are you really chasing, consort?” she asked in a delicate and almost soothing tone. It made Alps pause.

“I’m chasing my friend. I don’t want her to –” he was cut off again.

“Why would you ever leave the castle? You have your life-mate there, friends who fill you with great joy, no want of food or warmth, and even the public no longer holds ill will toward you for your strange appearance.” She continued

to speak, sounding as if she were trying to lure him into a dark corner for lack of any better way to describe it. "What is there out here, in this dangerous world that you are chasing? What would make you willingly go away from the things you hold most dear?" Nidaja's head lowered as Alps thought.

He could not believe she was making him actually rethink what he was doing, but he found himself unable to blurt out the answer he'd intended to give. Anyone could have come and taken Nidaja back to the castle so they could switch back. It did not have to be him. He immediately jumped at the chance to go. Why?

"I have to go." He said simply in that now uncertain tone.

"When you arrive, I want you to think very carefully about why you are really there." She stated. "Don't waste your time there. You won't get another chance."

"I don't know what you are talking about." He stated honestly.

"You will." The fox replied. "I see you have taken up Ressaia." She noted, nodding to the sphere Alps had put away a moment ago. The wolf picked it up again, putting the Shadowfall crystal back in its pouch.

"Ressaia... This?" he held it up. "You know what this is? How?"

"This is to be used by a Letai guardian. The Letai however, failed at using it because they lacked what it took to give it shape. You have what they lacked. Ask Nidaja to give it to you. I believe that she will." The vixen said. Her appearance seemed almost younger than Alps, with her sharp, youthful, angular features and her beautiful face, lean body, thick, well groomed tail. And yet, her personality made her seem like a sage, grey-muzzled scholar. Alps blinked again in confusion at her statements.

"Who are you?" he asked cautiously. The vixen reflected on that for a time as if trying to actually figure out the answer. Alps blinked Nidaja's eyes, dumbfounded. He was starting to feel like she'd have known the answer to anything, and this question stumped her? She finally answered in that same silky slow even tone.

"History would be so much less complex without so many names." Came her cryptic reply. "Must it be so necessary to knowing the many things that happen to also know who they have happened to?" she seemed weary with the fact. "Call me whatever you wish."



Alps gritted his teeth, a little irritated with the dark-mysterious game, and looked up to argue his point that he was trying to be respectful with her, only to gasp at the empty coach around him. It was not like she suddenly left. It was like she was never there. The figure of Nidaja leaned forward, holding her head in her hands. She looked up at Misha and Uri. Asleep. They hadn't seen a thing. They had heard none of the conversation.

"Oi... I think I've got too much going on at once." Her voice spilled out in a deep sigh.

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Nidaja got out of the coach and stroked the flanks of one of the slinks. They seemed amiable to the general, and did not seem to sense that she was anyone else. Alps himself had been afraid of slinks, and they seemed to know that, so they would act a bit aggressive and untrusting of him. In Nidaja's body, however, he was not afraid because these creatures knew her. She walked to the front of the inn that she had been dropped off at while the driver took his slinks for feeding. She looked up at the simple but elegant two story building. The slave looked up at the sign with his lover's eyes and rubbed the back of her head. She would walk right in, announce who she was, and get a room. That's how it worked. That was the power that the royal family held.

Seravi. It was a town just a little larger than Luca, where he was going, and it was the first place that he met his new mistress. As Alps considered this, he heard the sound of children playing. He turned around, and widened his eyes. A very familiar sight, but one he had not suspected he would see again.

"Priestess Akeena's orphanage..." he whispered. The old iron gates around it were exactly as he remembered, though they were only up to his neck, whereas before they towered above his head impossibly high. Alps looked back to the inn, and then turned and walked to that gate, pulling the latch, and moving into the yard. Four children were outside. It was later in the evening, so they were the older ones, perhaps about seven or eight. They were about the age he was when he was made into a slave. He nodded to them as they regarded the general. One of the girls chirped out brightly,

"Look, an emerald Amani woman, is it the queen?!" The others gathered around suddenly. Alps gritted Nidaja's teeth tightly. She didn't want recognition. She shook her head.

“No, no, children, I’m the General, Nidaja Razelle.” She waved her hands to them, trying to deflect their cheers. The girl tugged at the strap to her leather armor cuirass.

“Are you here to adopt one of us? I promise I will learn to clean your armor and feed your slinks and not even be scared.” Her tone was extremely serious and the other kids looked up at the general expectantly. Alps’ heart sank and Nidaja’s fur bristled. It was a terrible mistake to come here, he thought suddenly. Everything about the place came rushing in on him, and nearly brought the general to her knees as she held her head.

The image of himself as a child flooded his mind. At first he was a lot like this. He wanted to be adopted so badly. It was not to have a home or a purpose, but to get away from this place. It literally pulled the life out of him. The other children hated him, and the priestess here only fostered that hate by singling him out as being different and wretched. For most of his life he believed himself barren of soul and an accident of nature, abandoned by his mother because she would have been disgusted to have the world look at the thing she produced. This was what he’d been taught in this place, and these children wanted to leave too. It wounded him deeply, in the rapidly beating bosom of the general that the cycle continued now. What did these children feel? Were they looking at themselves as worthless burdens on society? Were they told they were there because their mother and father didn’t love them enough? Even if that were true, why would anyone tell that to a *child*?! Alps inhaled deeply, trying to clear his mind. Then something more recent overcame his reeling mind.

What are you chasing?

Alps gritted Nidaja’s teeth as she stated solidly. “No, I’m sorry I am not here to adopt today, but I will come back some time. For now, I am going to try to make things better for you while you are here.” He decided what his purpose here would be, if this was the only time he was ever going to come back to this place. Nidaja’s form entered the heavy double doors of the orphanage. The halls seemed so much smaller now, but were, as always, spotless, and almost polished clean. The children were still being used for this purpose. With a greater resolve, Alps entered an office at the end of the hall he knew very well.

“May I help you?” came an elder voice. Akeena was a lot older than Alps remembered, but it’s about what he expected. Nidaja closed the door behind her and pulled a chair up to the desk, feeling dominant again. Alps was finding that the more he did this, even in another form, the better he felt about it. Things needed done. As a slave, he learned what to do about things that needed done. No questions, you just had to do them.

"I am General Nidaja Razelle." stated the general. Akeena's eyes widened and she leaned over the desk, hands bridged.

"Are you wanting to adopt?" she asked. Nidaja shook her head.

"I want to talk to you about a child you auctioned about twelve years ago." She stated.

"That's a long time ago. I am not sure I would be able to tell you anything about them, other than their initial records. Do you have a name?"

"Alps." The green-furred general stated. The wolf in her mind felt a bit ashamed prying this way, but he felt it was his best chance to get answers that he badly needed.

"I don't know that name."

"I rather doubt you'd forget him. He had white fur." Nidaja stated calmly. The wolf knew that had to be memorable. The eyes widened again, this time almost fearfully.

"Alps... Yes, that's what we called him. With bad cases... We... We change their names. He was a bad case." Akeena said, her worn features a bit concerned.

"Explain what you mean by a bad case." He murmured in Nidaja's voice.

"Damaged. Not adoptable." She said flatly. Alps swallowed as he felt a prickle of anger welling in him.

"Why was he not adoptable?" the wolf wanted to know. Akeena narrowed her eyes and stated carefully,

"Why are you interested in that boy? He was auctioned as a slave. To my knowledge he still lives in Luca. He lucked out. Bought by a regional matriarch. I'm sure she would let you ask him anything you wanted to know." Akeena seemed evasive in saying that, which only irritated Alps further. This was not productive. This was not what he wanted to know.

"It was important to speak with you because you knew more about what the... situation was around his being an orphan. Do you have any idea what happened to his parents?" the general asked.

"That's what this is about? It's about his folks?" Akeena asked.

"What can you tell me about his folks?" Nidaja asked, hopeful.

"Nothing. He was found in the forests between here and Luca. Near some ruins, half starved. Would have died in a matter of a day or two if he wasn't found by some hunters. They brought him in. He spoke gibberish. Maybe he belonged to some mountain grays and got separated or something." The priestess explained.

"I fail to see how this makes him a hard case. I'm sure lots of kids have difficult pasts, and he was little when you found him, right?" he tried to remember his youth. He could not remember getting into trouble or causing problems. Was he really hard to handle?

"He was a mental case... saw ghosts, scared the other kids pretty bad. They became defensive, ostracized him, and then he started making friends with the spirits and the like. He calmed that down after a while, with a little humility and strict discipline, but the damage was done, and he was just... sullen and unapproachable. He tried to get people to adopt him I guess, because he didn't like me very much for the discipline I gave him. No one would take him though because I took him off the board. If we adopt out problems, we look bad, lose local funding, and then where are we?" she asked. "No, it was better that he have a life of work. Of purpose." She said.

"You took him off the board? You mean he never had the opportunity to be adopted by a nice family?" the general asked, shaking a bit. Alps really was mad now. He was having trouble controlling that.

"It's not as bad as all that. No one ever inquired about him. Ever. Just too unusual." She stated.

"What purpose did it serve to convince him he had no soul?" demanded Nidaja. This got a fearful stare from Akeena. "Answer me." The general added forcefully, thumping a fist on the table.

"Is that what he told you? That was the other problem. A liar. A storyteller." Akeena grumbled.

"I see. Well, the truth of this matter will come out soon enough. The orphan in question... if you will inquire about him from the local scribes receiving the news... He is my sister's new Life Mate." The look of horror that passed over

Akeena's face was unmistakable, and Alps felt a pang of guilt for the level of pleasure he felt in it.

"I can explain." Akeena said.

"Do you know what a mindwalk sphere is?" Nidaja asked.

"You don't know what it's like having to care for someone you know won't have a chance any other way but as a slave. You don't know the work I do for these children." She barked loudly, in a pleading voice.

"Perhaps not, but I *will* know. But I am going to give you a chance to... let the pressures of your past slide off your shoulders as it were. Alps needs not bother himself with memories of his time here if he knows that the children that are here are well cared for. Can I promise him they are getting the best chance at their new life?" Nidaja growled in a very threatening tone. Akeena gritted her teeth, and then bowed her head.

"These children will be the happiest in this entire town, I promise."

"Do not forget your promise." Nidaja stood and walked out, leaving the chair there, empty, as if a reminder that the office could well be occupied again.

Alps walked outside and nodded to the children playing, and headed for the inn. Uri and Misha were waiting patiently at the desk for Nidaja to get them in for free. Alps did this, and helped them with their bags and headed upstairs, forgetting, in his smirking sense of accomplishment that they were supposed to carry Nidaja's bags instead. They were both very tired, and did not complain, however.

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Nidaja, still in Alps' body, lay out under an open sky, watching the stars glimmer, so many of them in a deep, moonless myriad of sparkling patterns. Alps' eyes had seen them from here before, she was sure. What had he been thinking? In his aching form, she found she was not getting used to the pain like she thought she might. Did he always really feel this way? Was he feeling better in her body right now? She looked up as Tia sat down beside him, and stroked his bare chest. He'd untied his tunic as they plodded along, late into the evening, trying to keep up a good pace. Having this body did not lend well to getting transportation, and she left without a silver bit on her, so this seemingly unwanted wolf was on his own out here. Somehow, Nidaja felt that it was not

something she should have expected to be any different. Alps' life was like this before. She was going to see it through his eyes now, and return some of the suffering on its source. The thought of it made her more resolute, even as she placed a slow and careful hand on Tia's when she caressed his strong, lean chest.

"You seem in a very pensive mood, Alpsie." The grey lupine said in a timid tone.

"I am not looking forward to seeing her." He stated truthfully.

"Why would you? What do you have to accomplish, aside from maybe rubbing her face in the fact that you are gonna have it better than she ever will?" the girl said with a smirk. Nidaja recoiled a little at how innocent and playful that idea sounded in contrast to what she had really planned, and she found herself hoping she could get Tia out of any involvement by sending her away when it was time.

"My life ahead is going to be happy, and I am not going to let my unhappy past interfere with it. I need to resolve this. If I don't I am afraid I will never be what Nita needs for me to be." Nidaja lied. She felt a little guilty making these statements as Alps. It was likely he'd be perfectly happy to simply never think of Chana again, but what the general saw in Alps' mind, the memories that she witnessed, she could never have go unpunished, and as far as she was concerned, that monster deserved to have her last moment spent in the killing hands of her most tragic victim. Tia nodded slowly and slid in close to Nidaja as the general tried hard to seem more timid than she was. A slow and casual hand stroked over the wolf's lean and soft-furred chest.

Alps inhaled deeply, and Nidaja felt that now oddly familiar stirring of heat and pressure at the slave's loins. It was so easy for Alps to go from serious to seriously aroused. Tia pressed in close and rested her head on his strong chest, listening to his heart as her claw tips sifted slowly over his trim tummy, tracing a scar there that Nidaja now had a complete and full memory of.

Those violet eyes closed as a delicate and small hand carefully teased down to his belt line. Tia said softly, in her most silky and seductive tone,

"I think I can help you relax a little. Lift off some of that anxiousness. I bet you can't think of Chana while I have my mouth around your flesh, Alpsie." She offered, getting up on her knees. The wolf regarded her through half-closed eyes, smiling to her. Nidaja arched a little in his body feeling that stirring increase. It made her feel better to know Alps could physically yearn for release

every bit as much as she could, and so quickly if he was not already interested. She would not have a second thought about “using” him now.

“I don’t know...” he teased with a smile, wagging his tail between his thighs, “I have been walking heavily all day... I don’t really feel like extreme physical exertion.” He stretched out, putting his hands behind his head as if he might fall asleep. Tia mock-pouted at him and slipped both her hands over his tummy, and began untying his trousers.

“I guess we will just have to leave the physical exertion to me then.” The gray lupine replied. Alps smiled, his muscles flexing a bit as cool air rushed into the front of his pants when his lovely childhood friend spread the front open, revealing his already thickening shaft. She gave a twittering giggle and stated sultrily, “I don’t think that’s a very convincing resistance.” Her mouth leaning in and kissing along his tummy, making Nidaja shudder within the confines of the slave’s body, and more of that thick masculinity pressed into visibility from those opened trousers. Nidaja wondered if Alps would actually allow Tia to just have her way like this so easily. It did not seem to matter though. If she was having fun with the wolf, it was not something the owner of this body would mind. Alps loved his friends, and it was apparent that Tia held a special place in his heart.

“My body is yours to have fun with if you think it will make for a better night’s sleep for us then.” The white lupine stated, stroking Tia’s thigh. The girl murmured,

“This is entirely for you.” as her hands slipped around his swelling length. She was able to get both around it, and with such a very silky and delicate hold, stroked up and down over his pinkened flesh. Alps arched his back, Nidaja’s mind thrilled with how easily the pleasure coursed through the slave. It would never escape her now what she was able to do for him, or any male, if she knew what to do. This was a victory far greater than the one she ever originally intended to accomplish by stealing this body. A blush stole over her face as she wondered again if Alps was abusing her body the same way somewhere else.

Nidaja groaned in Alps’ voice, the general’s mind swirling as a wash of heat stroked down over that turgid shaft, the meat pulsing in Tia’s now full maw. Nidaja clutched Alps’ chest, something she’d do in her own body which did not work much in this one. She could not help it though, as his thighs parted easily to give complete access to the forcefully loving lupine female. She stroked her tight, suckling muzzle back up that spire of tingling flesh, and then pushed back down, hands ahead of her muzzle to give the sensation of much deeper penetration. Her tongue pressed the underside of that aching cock to the ribbed roof of her muzzle, strumming him so artfully as she’d done perhaps many times

before.

“You could make me cum so easily like this, Tia.” came Alps’ panting voice. “It’s almost unfair. It should not... ahah... be so easy.” His hips began to rise and fall, hands clutching the grass he was laying on, and Tia’s shirt, half tempted to tear it off. However, the girl was interested in just pleasuring her friend, so Nidaja decided to let her do that despite how much she wanted to just fold that sweet little mountain gray in half and drive a trench into the ground with her. Nidaja was getting a good taste of just how violently filled with need Alps could be, and how much control it must have taken him to even endure their first night.

And then memories of that first night came flooding back into the general’s mind, the slave’s eyes closing as he groaned with pleasure, knowing that, because of how Tia shivered, she got a nice pulse of pre just from the memory of the heat that the general had shared on the other side of this very body. Alps had been a virgin, and Nidaja, while certainly no virgin to physical pleasure, had not made love properly in over a year before getting Alps. When she first purchased him, it was all she could think of from the moment she left the stage with his hand in hers, to the moment she had him pulsing his thick seed against her hot, joyfully receiving cervix. Alps arched and spread his toes from the thoughts and memories of that night. The hot mouth drew off of his twitching member.

“Oh dear, you are worked up, aren’t you? Is it because we are doing this just off the side of the road? Are you hoping someone wanders by and finds us and has to watch such a scandalous thing unfold?” Tia practically purred, her tail flagging over her back as she knelt over his prone form. Nidaja panted inside that white slave, and shook her head. He murmured softly,

“N-No, just the memories of other things. Happy things. And things to come.” He gritted his teeth and huffed out, “I feel so much heat and passion when I am with those who I have come to love and respect. It’s incredible.” Nidaja felt it was something Alps might say. Still, she felt odd talking with Tia about this, because she could not have been sure what their life was like before this, and how much the sexual relationship had developed.

“I’m going to make you cum, Alps.” She panted, stroking his shaft with one hand wetly, her saliva slicking it up and down thickly. “If you aren’t nice to me, you are gonna be wearing this in your fur, and we are miles from a river.” She teased, pumping her hand. Nidaja gritted Alps’ teeth.

“I don’t think I would mind so much, knowing how it got there. I’ve been a



sticky mess before, you know.” He laughed, flexing his legs a bit. Tia grinned a toothy grin and churred,

“Stand up. You still don’t have to do anything else, just... Stand in front of me.” She demanded, rising to her knees. Alps did as Tia asked. Nidaja was rather fond of Tia’s occasional dominant nature, but she only seemed to be that way with people other than Alps and Azia. The gray female drew the wolf’s trousers down casually enough, letting the white wolf step out of them. He closed his eyes and groaned again deeply as two hands followed by a mouth pressed down his thick, throbbing shaft, the veins lining it tightly in the heightened, aching state of arousal she had him trapped in now. The extra muscle tension needed to stand made Alps feel the pleasure even more deeply as hands slipped back up his length when the girl drew back, pulling softly on his flesh as she suckled the tip. She began to hold that tip in her mouth, suckling and fluttering the tip with her tongue as her hands pumped up and down his shaft. Alps squeaked out helplessly,

“Tia! I’m gonna-“ Nidaja was utterly stunned at how fast she was ready. She was still not used to controlling Alps’ body with something like that happening. Tia’s head pulled back, and she smiled up at him deviously, hand still pumping up and down on his length.

“You don’t mind wearing it in your fur, but are you really going to make me go the next few miles with it all over my face?” she barked as she stroked him, tip aimed at her muzzle. Alps gasped loudly, and Nidaja forced every muscle in that body to clench to prevent what nearly happened at that moment from the mere thought of spraying that lean gray face.

“Hnnk!” he grunted, almost toppling. “Tia, that’s not funny, I almost, oh heavens, stop! I can’t hold it!” he barked loudly, panicking as those hands continued to slip evenly and slowly up and down his pulsing shaft. He felt like he was already cumming, just a little, and her hands were soaked in his pre, so it was possible that a bit of seed slipped free in that eager pumping. Alps whined loudly, Nidaja tensing terribly as she looked down and saw a single drop of pearly white rolling down Tia’s bare chest. She had not even seen her open her shirt during her playful bantering with the wolf.

“Oh dear, my nice clean fur...” she teased.

“Tia, I’m on edge, you can’t understand what it’s like...” Nidaja said with complete certainty that Tia had no idea. Nidaja would never have known until now. Had she ever forced Alps to hold it? She could not remember. Tia’s grin spread over her face with a sense of near absolute evil just from looking at her.

“Then do something about it, baby.” She barked back coyly. Nidaja grunted, and then narrowed her eyes, huffing. She was provoking Alps. The white slave growled darkly.

“I thought you said this was for me.” he said, as the gray female rolled onto her back to peel off her own trousers, wagging her bushy tail in the grass.

“It still is.” She crooned, getting back up. “But I didn’t say you got to choose what was for you. After all, you are still a slave, aren’t you? Your mistress has to feed you, but it doesn’t have to be what you want, right?” she teased.

“That’s mean.” Alps stated, and then gasped as those wet hands returned to his cock, stroking vigorously. Tia had just licked them to heat them and wet them again.

“No, mean would be... knowing how long it will be before I have a bath, but pumping all your seed into my soft, clean fur anyway.” She pressed herself up against him, rubbing his tip in against her neck, then cleavage as she used long, painfully expressive strokes on that thumping, pulsing cock. Alps groaned and bent his legs a little as Nidaja fought tooth and nail to figure out how to prevent those waiting torrents of thick cream from spewing violently all over Alps’ little friend. She spoke again, stroking his aching cock with both hands blatantly, touching his tip to the top of her sternum. “Oh poor boy, she’s not stopping, is she? She’s gonna leave you no choice! You can’t hold it, can you? I feel you shaking like a leaf... it belongs inside, why won’t she just take it inside... But you are just a little slave boy, you can’t make her do what you want, can you?” Alps whined a thick, wanting tone, and then Nidaja’s mind snapped into focus.

In that second, Nidaja realized what Tia was doing. Had it been Alps this was happening to it might have been more easily and immediately apparent, since he was a slave. Nidaja had a choice, and was making the choice consciously to act like slave, but Tia was trying to get Alps to act like he wasn’t a slave. This not only sent a surge of pleasure through Nidaja’s body which almost overwhelmed her self control over Alps’ aching body, but also gave her a rush of appreciation and genuine love for Tia. She wanted Alps to enjoy life, not just sex, and part of it was breaking the rules that had been forced on him for so long.

With that sudden realization came a flurry of motion. Alps’ knees lowered, and he threw himself at Tia, sending her skidding on the grass, making her scream, but with tail rapidly wagging.

“Bad boy, this was for you!” she barked playfully, hands on his shoulders, mock-struggling.

“This IS for me!” he growled out. Nidaja was a little shocked at the tone his voice made. She had never heard Alps sound like that, and Tia widened her eyes in shock too, and then wailed in delight as the wolf scooped her up, rolled her onto her knees and stooped in close behind her. His shaking hand grabbed her tail base, pulling that swishing extension out of his way as he drove himself hard forward, making the little girl lupine wail again loudly as she was impaled on his already nearly squirting cock. Alps made another ferocious sound, a roar of desperate pleasure as Nidaja completely gave in to his body. The nature of what he was supposed to do now. What every cell in his body demanded that he do now.

Tia seemed thoroughly stunned, not that he gave in, but the force of it all. Nidaja was never a slave, and being forceful was in her nature. While she was perfectly aware this was not likely how Alps would have done it, she was again sure Tia would forgive this use of force, especially since her tight depths were already convulsing around him within seconds of his intrusion. Teasing him had her primed already, it seemed.

“Oh Alps, I’ve never seen you so strong, don’t stop!” she cried, giving her full permission.

“I intended to do no such thing.” He growled, making sure Tia knew he wasn’t going to stop even if she begged. She released a broken cry, a squeak of almost pain as his body impacted her from behind, skidding her elbows in the grass as he drove himself with angry force against her padded rump, sinking his tapered tip all the way to the firm barrier of her cervix! His body impact seemed almost a punishment with how solid each lustful meeting of his thighs against hers was. “Teasing your best friend, how... could... YOU?” he barked, thumping her from behind, making her cry each time. Alps’ eyes narrowed, his pupils dilating as Nidaja succumbed to a deeper level of primal lust than she ever remembered feeling in a female body. This was utter perfection of animalistic desire, and it was an intoxicating addiction to her senses.

Tia cried out again as strong white hands gripped her strong but fair hips with almost cruel force, sinking claw tips into flesh as he drove himself hard into her. Nidaja blushed a bit as she realized, hunched over Tia, fucking her so violently, Alps was actually drooling down her back. She almost forced herself to calm down until a sinking, helpless howl spilled from Tia’s wide jaws, head held down. She shuddered and quaked as the soft “chuff-chuff-chuffing” of his furry hips striking hers suddenly shifted to a lewdly wet “splatch-splatch-splatch” as the

girl climaxed heavily around him. Those slick, puffy inner muscles gripped him with dizzying tightness. Nidaja recognized the sinking howl that Tia gave, however. A full body release.

The desire to force pleasure into this girl was the deepest need Nidaja had in her mind now, pitching herself hard against Alps' screaming little friend, pulling her violently against his hips. His hand sometimes left that body where he'd been gripping so tight at her sides or tail-base only to slap the girl's backside or legs with reckless abandon, causing a mix of savage pleasure and pain. Violent and desperate sex was rapidly overtaking what the general was sure had always been an intimate exploration between the two. She didn't regret it though. This is what Tia was instigating, and based on her reaction to it, exactly what she was longing for. The harder and more viciously the general threw Alps' body against Tia's back, the louder and more desperately pleased her cries.

Nidaja realized, as her body lurched hard against Tia that the two of them had traveled a good eight feet across the grass, the forceful rutting having heavily pushed the suddenly helpless girl forward with every stroke. The general grinned sadistically. She wondered what this kind of sex felt like. The general tightened suddenly, as Alps' eyes widened. Considering the same thing happening to her self was immediately too much. When the thought of Alps driving into her this hard stabbed through her vibrantly imaginative mind, it was just too much. The image of her body lurching with Alps slamming from behind, relentless, and overpowering consumed senses in an instant!

She buckled over Tia and roared with furious release, hips hammering the lupine beauty from behind, shaking her violently, ravaging her as pulse after pulse after thick, opalescent pulse filled her convulsing wet channel, the sticky white goo splashing back into his lap as he slammed himself with only increasing ferocity into Tia. She wailed again, this time nearly at the top of her lungs as every muscle in her body went shakily rigid, and that tight sex choked around his pistoning shaft with fluttering release. It was hopeless to keep him still inside her though, no matter how tight the contraction as he thumped hard into her, chest against her back. Alps' legs were shaking with the strain of the force he was using against the now timid girl as torrents of his seed bathed Tia internally through the most copious male climax Nidaja had yet experienced. Her mind flooded with the simple realization that this was not merely pleasure, it was painful. It was agonizing to go through, but she could not make herself stop, driving Alps' spouting cock deep into his sobbing, shaking friend

Finally, holding her tight around the middle in his crushingly strong arms with his tip buried against her cervix tightly, he smeared what remained of that spurting essence against her deepest chamber before his legs sank down, the

wolf falling over her back, and pressing the girl flat into the grass. He grunted softly, wheezing with heavy panting, the muscles in his legs and arms burning as he held Tia tightly. Both were flinching and shuddering from aftershocks. Nidaja knew by how hard she had been gripping Tia that small wounds prickled her flesh from Alps' claws. The soft, happy crying coming from the girl was music to her ears, though.

Gasping for breath, Alps remained on top of Tia, cock still buried to the hilt in her. His hips were mashed up to her soaking and sticky rump. They were *both* going to need a bath after this. Nidaja could not find it in herself to regret it though. Tia began to breathe more evenly and slowly, so Nidaja held her self up a bit, arms shaking, muscles suddenly weak.

"Before you complain about the claw marks, I will remind you that you brought this on yourself." came Alps' unusually dominant voice. There was no answer. Alps leaned forward, his voice raspy from panting. "Tia? You okay?" Her eyes were barely open, one a little more than the other. Now completely spent, Nidaja drew Alps' still throbbing cock out of those tight, greedy depths, a bit of crimson mixed in the fur on his tummy from the abusive way took his friend. Nidaja could not even remember putting those red claw marks down her back like that, but things had gotten very frantic through the most intense of it.

"Tia?" he asked again, his voice concerned. Nidaja rolled the gray female onto her back. Her expression immediately told the experienced fighter exactly what she needed to know.

Out cold.

Tia had passed out from the ravaging. Nidaja stroked her face, watching her breathing a bit, and then smiled, sitting Alps down on his haunches, gazing at the girl. "Serves you right, you mischievous thing." The general said in Alps' voice. "You are gonna feel that for a week." She inhaled a bit, feeling the burn in Alps' muscles. "Ooohhh... so is Alps. I think I will have a little more explaining to do later." She noted, shaking her head and laughing.

Nidaja looked up at the stars again as she lay down heavily beside the now naked, soaking, sticky Tia. She churred softly, "The closer I get to this task, the more I question what I am going to have to do at the end of this. I know what I want to do, but these old wounds, these scars, all of these terrible things make me think that I am simply not capable of doing justice here. Not an eye for an eye." Nidaja narrowed Alps' eyes. "No matter what, I will make her be afraid. I will make her beg. I will make her regret what she did to you, my love." her hands caressing that scar down Alps' tummy. "I will make her regret it."

## Sirius, Book III

### The Essence

*Comments or Questions?*

Contact Alps: [sarsis@gmail.com](mailto:sarsis@gmail.com)

Or just drop a note at: <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/sarsis/>

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## Chapter 6

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The words of that strange fox had been hanging in Alps' mind as he moved quickly toward the town of Luca. He had not wanted to get hung up in Seravi, but he felt better now that he had ensured a little better future for the children there. The wolf looked back at Misha and Uri. As far as they were concerned, they were following Nidaja to deal with one of Nita's personal problems, but the personal problem was a direct result of the slave's own past. He hoped they would be able to forgive him after all of this. Still being pulled by the Slinks in their small coach, Alps knew it was possible they could catch up in time or even beat Nidaja, still borrowing his body, to their destination. If he did not succeed, however, he feared what he'd find there.

"Nidaja, you seem rather pensive." The genuinely more talkative Uri tilted. "You still haven't told us what it is you think Alps is doing. I think you owe it to us, since we've been running for so many days, to at least let us in on a little of what personal matter is putting everyone in an uproar." Alps sighed softly. He was put in a position where telling them what Alps was doing was not accurate. It was what Nidaja was doing. He decided that, at this point, the mask had to come off. It would be brutally confusing if there was a confrontation in town and they were only about six hours or so away.

"Misha... Uri..." the general's voice whispered. "I'm not Nidaja." The green lupine gasped at the reaction, which she should have expected but honestly did not. She had just finished that last word when a long, glittering silver long sword pressed right up against her throat. Misha had drawn so quickly Alps could not even see it enough to flinch in time. Had her intent been murderous, he'd be a corpse now. There was a tense, anxious silence. It seemed to last forever. The coach tilted and listed over uneven ground, and Alps knew that a deep rut in the terrain could accidentally open the general's throat.

"Then who are you? I had suspected..." growled Misha. "I had suspected something was different... something was wrong. Where is the real Nidaja!?" Alps reeled at the sudden turn of mood. He felt that it was warranted, however. He inhaled deeply to clear his mind and then spoke calmly and softly, wanting to avoid getting a more intimate visit from Misha's sword. His complete inability to see that coming should have been all the proof they needed that this was to the real Nidaja.

"Misha, it's me. It's Alps." There was a long pause. Uri blinked a few times. The blade stayed at the general's neck. It was Misha who finally spoke.

"I don't think I understand. I have to accept that some strangeness is going on by the fact that you are not Nidaja, even though you are physically her, and you do 'feel' like Alps... but what proof do I have that you are him?" she asked.

"We have not spent enough time together for me to easily give you proof." The wolf stated, hoping that he could get this resolved before they arrived in Luca. The sun was already low in the sky. It would be dark by the time they got there. "Nidaja used her Mindwalk sphere to try to find out more about my past because of the unusual abilities I had displayed inside the Shadowfall. It lets her into my mind." He explained.

"I know about the Mindwalk sphere." Misha stated, Uri nodding as well. "She uses it to test her closest lieutenants to make sure they are loyal before appointing them. So you are saying that your mind ended up in her body... then where is her mind?"

"On its way to Luca?" Uri asked, seeming by her tone already to know the answer. Alps nodded the general's head. Misha finally put her sword away.

"Why? Why would she go there? Why would she run off like this?" Misha asked sternly.

"She saw something in my memories." the general's voice stated. "She saw something that made her angry with my former mistress." The general's head lowered. In the end, it was Alps who was responsible for this turn of events. He knew what memories would be waiting for anyone. It could have been Nita who saw that and he did not really warn them about how bad it was. The coach continued to rumble along silently. The slinks themselves never made noise when they moved, only the coach. It was easy to forget those huge, weasel-like beasts were even out there.

"What did she see?" Uri asked.

"What do you think?" Misha growled to her friend and lover. "That insufferable whore was abusive to him. You saw the scars." Uri gritted her teeth at that. She looked up to Alps and murmured softly,

"Is this... true? She hurt you?" came her slow and measured words. Alps hung the general's head again. He did not like talking about this. It was not a happy time in his life and he really wanted nothing more than to just leave it all behind. He never understood the way people clung on to painful things and felt

the need to discuss them for some kind of healing. The slave felt like he was healing just fine even when he was on the boat heading to Diera for the first time. He spoke in Nidaja's voice softly.

"It was almost every day. It was the worst when she was drunk, and there were times I was so close to dying that I begged the darkness to take me and make it end. Yes, she hurt me, but I don't want Nidaja to do anything to her for it. I just wanted to leave it all behind me. I am not Chana's slave any more and I could be happy about that. I don't want Nidaja, Nita, or any of my friends to harm my former mistress for what was done to me. I feel that her misdeeds are being best punished by my happiness, and I will not be afraid to tell her the joy I have found." he stated.

"Alright, Nid-... Alps..." Misha said with a sigh, hands between her knees. "I will not do anything to Chana, but only because you asked that I do not. I personally believe that she deserves what Nidaja's got in mind. I do not envy her position one bit if we are too late." Alps nodded at that softly and then looked to Uri who looked out the window silently. There was a long silence at that, and then she looked back to Alps, her eyes gleaming wet. She was apparently trying to use the breeze from outside the coach to prevent her from crying.

"I won't promise." She growled, visibly shaking. Alps sighed a heavy Nidaja-sigh.

"It won't change what she did to me. It won't make it better." He stated in the general's slow and confident tone. He was having less difficulty using that now.

"If she did it to you, she could do it to someone else!" Uri barked loudly, startling Alps, and obviously Misha. "What's to stop her from going to Seravi tomorrow and grabbing one of those children, then torturing him all through life for her sick entertainment?!" Nidaja's teeth gritted. Alps had not thought of that. He shook the general's head again.

"That may be true, but I will leave that for the council to prevent. They can remove rights from her; they can even remove her from her position of power. If she cannot afford to purchase a slave, that won't be an issue." He stated calmly, trying to bring Uri down from her anger. Uri crossed her arms and growled out loudly,

"Rules and laws and even a general code of ethics won't mean anything to her! You were a *child* Alps! You were helpless!" the black-furred lupine shouted, thumping the side of the coach with her fist. "She deserves-"

"She deserves what the world is going to give her in the end. Nothing." He shouted, cutting her off. "I will not have any of my friends dirty their hands over



my problem. If she had to die for this, I am sure Nita would allow me to do it myself, but that's not what I want. What I want is for my friends to respect my wishes and not give me one more dark memory to live with over this worthless bitch so I can get on with the life that I am truly enjoying!" he heard his own feminine voice raise in pitch, and lurched back, leaning heavily into his seat. "I want to leave that all behind and be with my friends and my love. It's all I need now." He whispered. Uri leaned back again and wiped her eyes.

"I'm sorry. Alright, I will promise. But understand this. I don't like it. I don't think she should be allowed to live, but I am going to talk with the council about this. You will not stop me from doing that. If the council decides to punish her, then that will be something you have no say in." she growled.

"If it's the will of the council then Chana brings that on herself. That will not be on my hands." He conceded. There was a long silence as the coach continued to rumble along. Finally, Misha spoke; ears folded back, tinted red.

"So... How was sex as a girl? Learn anything useful?" Alps felt the general's cheeks suddenly almost violently heat up.

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Nidaja pushed open the heavy doors of the Inn and walked in with a white lupine male's body which was familiar apparently to many of the people in the room who were sitting about eating and drinking. It was late in the afternoon, and the sun was almost down. It was the perfect time to relax from working in the fields and the shops and have a drink or two. The general looked around quietly, trying to appear meek and harmless which is what anyone who knew Alps before he left would expect. At the bar, laughing and talking with a nervous-looking patrol, was a familiar tan-furred lupine female, with short cropped hair and a starkly thin, boney body. Chana Feras. Nidaja approached casually but silently in that aching white form.

"Oh now there is a face that has been missing from Luca for many a moon." said the thickly built grey-furred female bartender with unkempt frizzy hair. Mountain grays were usually thick-furred like this one, not as svelte and lovely as Tia, who was more an exception. The bartender's words called attention to the entering wolf with every appearance of being Alps.

Nidaja had seen to it that she would be alone now, to tend to these matters without interference from well-meaning friends. Tia had been left with her father, Edgar Reed, who was a blacksmith for the town. She would catch up

on old times and tell him all about the adventures she had while she was gone, surely, and leave Alps, with Nidaja in control of this rather dark situation.

"It has been. Hello... Mistress." He stated to Chana, who looked shocked at first, but then narrowed her eyes.

"You do not call me that, you insufferable whelp. You got yourself purchased by nobility. What the hell are you back for?" she had a very high degree of hatred in her voice. Nidaja smiled almost wickedly, unable to help herself. Perhaps running her own bath and brushing her own hair were too tedious for Chana? The regional matriarch growled a deep and threatening tone. "What are you smiling about, you worm?! You are interrupting my dinner. Go away. Barkeep, I would like to have this worthless bit of fluff removed." At this, the tousled gray lupine sighed and pointed at the door. Nidaja frowned. The regional matriarch for Luca had certainly put a chokehold on this town if that was all it took. She looked sternly back to Chana.

"If you must know, I didn't come to disturb you; I came to pay you what I was really worth. In the year I've been gone, it has troubled me what price I was taken away from you for. It made me feel worthless, and I find myself dwelling on it more and more. My new mistress has taken pity upon me in how this distresses me, and allowed me to bring you a more reasonable amount. Twenty bits is insulting to me just as it was to you. Four thousand should be enough?" Chana's eyes glinted with greed at that. Nidaja knew she would be interested.

"You have... four thousand to give to me?" Chana asked casually, her mood improving. Nidaja held out her arms.

"Obviously not *on* me. Look... I don't want to make a big deal out of this. Meet me here..." the white wolf gave Chana a folded up note. "Meet me there at midnight. I will give you the money then. I don't want to ever be seen bowing and scraping to you again. I have a new life. A happy life. I have to do this to leave behind this place, and all my memories of it." He growled.

"I will take the money, pup, but only because I was cheated before. Don't think you are finding a warm spot in my heart. You know better." She hissed. Alps' lips drew back slightly.

"We will see if there's warmth in there." He muttered almost imperceptibly.

"What?" she asked. Her eyes narrowed at the slave's muttering.

"I said I know there's no warmth in there." He turned to leave. "Don't be late. I won't wait forever, and if you are not there, I will just assume you didn't want the money, and I will give it to the orphanage where you bought me." He walked out amid murmuring and the resuming typical humdrum of a tavern.

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Alps approached the now silent town in Nidaja's body, scarcely able to wait to get back into his own. A long discussion with his friends had made the next several hours of his journey pass quickly, as embarrassing as it was to discuss. It was true, being in this body had taught him a lot, and Uri especially made it clear she wanted to test what Alps had learned when he got into his own body again.

But now, with his friends behind him, Nidaja's leather-clad form strode through the silent streets of Luca. Was he too late? Where would Nidaja have done it? In Chana's house? In the woods outside town? Would she think to lure Chana away and make it look like an Orcish attack? The shops were all closed and the streets pretty well empty. The town had no reason to be active long after dark because farming and mining were not night time activities. Alps felt certain that they were too late. They could not have beat Nidaja here without noticing her. Misha finally spoke up, pointing forward.

"Look! Is that who it looks like?" she hissed under her breath. Nidaja's head looked forward, the general's chest tightening. With what he was expecting, it could be something really bad. He breathed a sigh of relief as he saw what Misha was pointing at. Nidaja, in Alps' body, was on the stage where he had been purchased a year before, holding a box in his hands. Chana was there, her arms crossed, looking sternly at the wolf. Nidaja was talking to her, but Alps could not hear what was being said. They sped up alongside the front of some of the shops. Finally, Alps was in range and could hear the discussion.

"... could not possibly be telling me that you brought me out here in the middle of the night without ever intending to pay me, you stupid freak of nature." Chana said coldly. Alps pressed Nidaja's back against the shop front, and Misha and Uri did as well, perhaps just as curious as to what was going on as he was.

"You deserve nothing from me, in the end, Chana. But I will level with you. I originally brought you out here to kill you." There was a sudden easy visibility of the whites of Chana's eyes. Alps' heart froze in his chest. To hear that stated in his gentle voice was hard on him.

"What?! I'm just a shout away from the guards, I'll have you know. For even saying that I can have you hanged and it does not matter whose slave you are!" She growled with a sense of superiority she seemed never to lose, even with such a grim threat having been made against her.

"I said originally. I changed my mind. I have no intention of harming you now. My beloved would never forgive me." Alps listened to his own voice say this words and his heart swelled with joy and pride. He was just in time for something even more valuable than stopping Nidaja from killing Chana.

"Why the change in heart? Found out how much you missed me while you were gone when you saw me again?" Chana scornfully muttered. "What's in the box if not money?" she asked. Alps' form bowed down and put the box on the stage, then backed up. Nidaja's form stayed in the shadows against what smelled wonderfully like a bread shop. It was hard not to feel suddenly hungry despite the dread in his heart. Chana moved forward and opened the box, then withdrew from it a slender silver dagger. It looked expensive and well cared for. Alps silently wondered where Nidaja had gotten it.

"As you see, it had been my intent. I don't need it anymore. You can keep it as my farewell to you. I have decided that it does not change anything to leave you dead in a ditch somewhere, Chana. You see, in a very short time, I will be the life mate of the Queen in Diera. You don't have to believe me now, the news will reach you through its regular channels soon enough, and you can spend your life alone for all I care, thinking about how happy I get to be while you have to follow the orders of the person who spends every single night bringing me pleasure and happiness. I will laugh louder than you, eat better than you, drink finer wines and leave behind better stories. I don't need you. I don't need a single extra memory of you. Where I am going, even my scars can't really follow." He turned and Chana gripped the dagger more tightly. Alps gritted his teeth, Nidaja's muscles tightening under his command. He feared suddenly that Chana might attack his body, and that would not do at all.

"What's wrong, Alps?" Chana asked darkly, "Did it not hurt enough when I scalded you under your tail with a hot poker? Surely you remember your screams from the outhouse in the days that followed? Did you forget having your toe claws pulled out for waking me with their incessant clicking on the stairs?" she asked. Alps gritted Nidaja's teeth as he saw his own fists ball up on stage. "You were eight years old for that, and that was just the beginning." She said proudly. "The best was yet to come. Do you still believe you have no soul? That was my favorite part. I loved just fucking with your innocent little mind as a child. Then, as you got older, teaching you to punish yourself while I watched. I can't believe you would break your own fingers. I still roll around laughing late at night at the thought of your tail hanging worthlessly behind you, unable to move after being broken so many times. How you recovered from that and ever got the ability to pick it up again and wag it is beyond me, but I guess I will have to start over, won't I? I will have to get another little child from that filthy orphanage and start on another little boy. Maybe that one will have the emotional fortitude when I am done to be half as strong as I am." she laughed coldly. Alps body lurched a little as Chana mentioned starting over.

Everything happened so quickly after that. Misha and Uri were not as fast as Alps in Nidaja's body, but even Alps was not able to stop his body in the sudden blur of motion that it took to bring him in full contact with Chana who went sailing off the stage backwards. From the force of the impact, the regional matriarch hit the ground before the knife landed on the stage. It had flown out of her hand when she leveled it to strike her former slave down. Her plan had been obvious. Anger him enough to attack her and then be perfectly justified in ending his life. She had not, however, been prepared for the fact that Alps' body was not populated by the gentle slave's mind. Nidaja was a trained killer in a strong body. Chana's knife was no defense in comparison. Alps was, however, fast enough to get in Nidaja's way when she jumped off the stage and moved quickly toward Chana's coughing, winded form to resume the beating.

"You!" she coughed, furiously. "Did you see that? He came to kill me! This is HIS knife!" she wailed, pointing at the knife that lay on the stage now. "I demand he be arrested and tried!" Nidaja, in Alps' body, seemed stunned to see the green general, her own body, standing before her.

"You will hold your tongue until you outrank me, you miserable bitch!" came words that shocked Alps himself as the general's mouth formed them. He was just as furious as Nidaja was about the threat to do this to another child. Uri had been right all along. Alps' words from Nidaja sounded more like Nidaja than perhaps the mind of the general had expected, and she actually seemed to genuinely cower. Alps knew why immediately. Nidaja thought Alps was mad at her, and that was where all the rage came from. Alps inhaled deeply into the general's lungs. Chana spoke shakily, still winded.

"My apologies... General Razelle. I was understandably upset." The matriarch then paused a moment to perhaps compose herself. Nidaja walked over to Alps, pulling him by the wrist off of the stage, and pushing him back against it roughly. Misha and Uri knew that their minds were switched, so seeing it was a thing of intrigue to them both. Alps was actually manhandling the general.

"You do not run off without my leave and take something so grim upon yourself! Your hands are not meant for this kind of thing. They are meant for my love... lovely. My lovely sister. Remember?" she shook the Nidaja inhabited Alps by the shoulders, and Alps whimpered. He shook his head, agreeing. Of course, Nidaja had already agreed not to kill Chana, so Alps felt certain that now that the rage had been stricken from her, he could expect she would not press the issue. The general spun on her heels and rather suddenly grabbed Chana, jerking her hard to her feet and slamming her against the side of the stage as well, surely bruising her back against the lip of those planks. She winced and cried out.

"Stop, I'm the victim here!" she cried with more than a tinge of fear.

“The urine-soaked HELL you are, you orc-laying harlot!” Nidaja’s voice roared. “I will pass the official decree by my sister the moment I return. I will have you stripped of your merit and your authority, I will have you banned from owning land, slaves, or even livestock for the rest of your life, and you can depend on a friend to take care of you!” Then Nidaja’s lips curled into a hateful smile. “Oh yes... that’s right... With no money, land, or power, no one in this entire town would likely feel the need to tolerate you. Might wanna take what little money you have and find a new place to live.” She turned back to Nidaja who stood in the stunned and silent form of Alps, who finally just pressed in against the armor-clad general.

“I’m so sorry...” came the slave’s voice from Nidaja’s nearly crying soul. “I was going to, but I knew... I knew you would not want this.” His voice murmured.

“It’s forgiven. You proved what you were when you gave her the knife. We can leave this behind. Let’s go back to the inn. This is all over.” Nidaja’s soft and confident tone lilted.

“Thank you.” croaked the strained throat of the wet-eyed slave. Uri and Misha came up alongside their friends, both to offer support, and strength. Chana had just been dealt some very ugly cards, and neither of the guards trusted her with a knife not far away. Chana shouted some manner of muffled obscenity into her hands, enraged, and ran heavily back to her large home at the end of the row of finer houses across from the shops. A solid wooden door slammed hard enough to knock a pin free of the hinges, causing it to hang dejectedly to one side. Nidaja’s chest puffed out as Alps drew a long, deep breath, and then sighed rather happily.

“That felt so very, very good.” Nidaja’s voice squeaked.

“I see you have learned to act a little more like a general while you’ve been in that body. I can’t call that a bad thing.” Nidaja said in Alps’ voice.

“We should get back to the hotel and switch bodies before we complicate matters any further.” Nidaja’s voice murmured. Alps was tired of pretending, and wanted to go back to being himself, even if it had been, for a time, liberating. “Where’s Tia?” he asked.

“She’s with her father. Probably asleep by now, it’s late.” The white slave stated. “She doesn’t know I’m me.”

“We should keep it that way.” Alps stated from the general’s lips.

“I have to confess something.” Nidaja said from the slave’s body.

“Probably the same things I have to confess.” Nidaja’s voice cut in. Uri and Misha both laughed playfully.

“Alps you wouldn’t have!” Nidaja protested in his masculine voice.

“What did you do to Tia?” he asked.

“Umm...” there was more laughter.

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Alps looked into his own eyes for what he hoped would be the last time without a mirror. Nidaja’s hands, still guided by his mind, held the sphere that the general had used to switch their minds. The two were alone. For the first time since this all began, they were alone together. Tearful apologies and promises had been made, but all concerns were water under the bridge now. All that remained was for the general and slave to switch their minds again, and the orb in the general’s hands was all it would take. They would concentrate, and Nidaja would access it with her mind, and push their souls back to where they belonged. It has been an incredibly strange experience, and Alps intended to use that journal Nita had given him months ago to recount every detail lest he ever begin to forget. It was a story that deserved to be told some day. He and Nidaja had both grown some with it.

The process was painless, and only took a few fleeting moments, but, dizzy and disoriented, Alps found himself facing the other way suddenly, as if the room had spun around, rather than his focus merely switched. He looked up into Nidaja’s eyes, and thankfully, was done with being in a strange body. The wolf was immediately aware of the pain as it returned to him. The various scars and old broken bones and aching lungs from untended infections from the past were there to greet him. Nidaja too seemed to be aware of the lifting of those aches and pains that the time in his body had made her used to. She put her hands on his chest, clad in red leather vest.

“I never knew... how much you hurt every day, Alps.” She whispered. “We will talk with Misty when we arrive home. She may be able to help you.” The general crooned softly. Alps nodded softly.

“It’s alright... There are other things that ease the pain that you have already done. Your love and our friendship have done much to make me forget it. Blind to it, with every breath we take together.” His gentle tones told the lady

lupine. She smiled at his gentleness and leans in, touching the soft fur of her cheek to his own.

“Thank you Alps. I needed to hear that. It makes me feel whole to know that you suffer so much less because of me. I look back and I see what you have been through, and know now what I took you away from, and even for all the good I have done my empire I am not so proud of that as I am the single act of saving you.” She whispers. “I am sorry I put you through this over my selfish need for revenge.” Alps wrapped his arms around the general, clad in night silks so that she was as soft and inviting as possible.

“Nidaja, you misunderstand. This was a harrowing experience, I will admit, but the more I look back, and now forward, the more I know it was necessary in a way. I was not truly saved until now.”

“I don’t understand.” The general said, leaning back and looking into her sister’s mate’s violet eyes. They were so gentle and innocent, and they almost watched her commit murder in his form. It was incredible to hear him saying there was good to those intentions.

“Two things happened during this trial.” He stated sagely. “First, I am able to put the suffering of my past behind me. That is a small boon to ease my pain and clear my mind for the happiness to come. It will strengthen my heart, and my heart needs to be strong to best serve and love your sister, and you, and all our friends. It beats stronger with my conviction and love than ever before.” He pulled Nidaja a little closer, nuzzling at her neck before whispering, “Second, and I think more importantly, I got to live as you for some time. I gained something from that, something that, just being back in my own body, won’t change. You saw it tonight didn’t you?”

“I ... I think so, Alps. You got stronger. Not physically. Your spirit, I mean. You were ready to fight; you were ready to take control. You learned to be...” she seemed to search for the words.

“I learned to be something other than a slave.” He finished for her. “I learned to be independent, and make my own choices and believe in myself. I had to if I was going to be you. In the end, I came out of this a better person.” He murmured in this soft voice. “I had been worried that I would not be strong enough in the eyes of the people to be what Nita wanted me to be. I thought about it a lot. But now... Now I know I can be that strong. I can grow stronger and be the slave she loved, and the mate she needs.” He said warmly. Nidaja then silenced him with a kiss, and pushed him back slowly, her silk clad form over him, gentle and soft. Alps blushed a bit and looked up at her.



“Our first kiss was in this very room.” He reminded her. She sat up a bit, and then looked at the open-shuttered window. The moon shone in brightly. She smiled at him.

“It was the middle of the afternoon. I brought you here with the intention of playing with you to see if you might make a good companion for my sister. I didn’t think I’d fall in love with you myself.” She chuckled.

“Take off your silks, Nidaja.” Alps’ sure and happy tone lilted, making the general raise her eyebrows.

“Plans for your mate’s sister?” she asked softly, standing up by the bed, her strong, lean, emerald form gleaming in the moonlight. She crossed her arms coyly.

“I’m stronger now. I can make plans.” He offered, teasingly.

“Stronger? I still see a soft, white slave, sitting on the bed, waiting to be taken advantage of by the mysterious general who purchased him over a year ago.” She laughed.

“Oh I’m not that slave anymore. I promise.” He said, sitting up, hands on the edge of the bed as his feet touched the floor, the wolf looking up at Nidaja, eyes gleaming with aggressive energy. Nidaja smiled a very mischievous smile.

“Prove it.” She growled. With that, rather suddenly, Alps stood, and the green-furred general squeaked with surprise, backpedaling a bit before her back thumped against the wall beside the window, the white lupine slave pressing her heavily against it and taking her hands, holding them above her head as his chest pressed against her own quickly rising and falling bosom. The general puffed out softly, “Yes, this is much better than the last time we were here.” Alps leaned up with his nose to the rim of her ear, and growled darkly,

“I wasn’t waiting for permission.” His hips pushed up against Nidaja’s, the thin silk letting her feminine curves between her thighs feel the ridge of need the wolf had hidden under his canvas trousers. The general squeaked with delight at his words as he tucked his muzzle over her jaw line, nipping downward along the ridge of it, and then over her neck, biting firmly. His tail lashed side to side slowly as his form pushed against her, not letting her free. The general pushed back a little, as if trying to struggle, but Alps knew in a real fight she’d have him on the floor in pieces if it were not what she wanted. He smiled into the bite he gave her and he lifted her silk top up, peeling it off her arching form. Her pushed his hands under those perfect breasts, nipples trapped between splaying fingers as he squeezed, keeping her neck in his jaws, squeezing a bit tighter if she moved in a way that he didn’t want her to.

“Oh... my...” came Nidaja’s suddenly breathless words as the wolf continued to manhandle her much as he had when she was in his own body hours ago. His hips bucked against her own again firmly as one of her legs rose to curl around the back of his thighs. If she wanted, she could push him back and trip him like that, but instead, she pushed her own panty-clad hips against his thickening covered masculinity. The scent of her arousal spilled from her like water overflowing from a fountain, rich and powerful. Alps gave a commanding snarl to her as he released with his teeth and rumbled,

“I let your wrists go for a reason, general. Put those hands to good use.” His words were spoken as if somehow he outranked her. She squeaked in pleasure again as his hips moved back enough to indicate what he meant before he revisited her neck with his jaws, holding her with grim determination. Those slender and usually calm and careful hands shakily swept down his chest and tummy to his trousers, awkwardly working the straps to free them, and finally, parting the folded-over front of the fabric, both hands eagerly wrapping around the thick, aching meat that fell forward from the dividing cloth. Alps growled hotly, needful for her touch. He gave a little jerk of his muzzle, pulling at her with his teeth insistently.

Nidaja understood and began to slip her hands up and down that throbbing flesh, feeling every pulsing vein slipping between her fingers as she squeezed and stroked that already hot and tightly swollen lupine cock. Alps pushed his hips back a bit, and then forward, rumbling affectionately as he rested his chin over the general’s shoulder to pant with pleasure and lust.

“Oh dear... it seems I have found the means with which to calm the savage beast.” The general crooned with sweet longing.

“Nidaja...” Alps panted out through clenched teeth, “tease your self with me. Rub me against you through your silks.” His body was trembling a little at the thought. Nidaja did as she was told, pushing the tapered tip of that throbbing pink flesh to the divot of her sex through the light and paper-thin silk of her panties, gasping at the pressure. Alps wrapped his arms around her again, biting and kissing hotly at the side of her neck and shoulder as he felt the burning tease of that aching cock against quickly slicked silk fabric, soaked through with his pre almost immediately, and mixing with the general’s own hot, slick juices.

“Just like that?” she asked, head tilted back, the female lupine seeming lost in her own fantasy and lust as she held him tightly in shaking fingers, teasing him against her silk-covered petals. She spread them with that firm head, seeping that tangy slick fluid to make herself even slicker for him. In reality, Alps could hardly tell she was still wearing anything for how wet and smooth that fabric was. Alps nodded softly, and groaned out,

“Push me against you... through your panties... Rub me there... Do it...” he panted, getting more and more worked up at just telling her what to do, even if it was not the most productive means for having sex. It felt very good, and he was enjoying playing with Nidaja in this very memorable place.

“As you command.” Nidaja’s words spilled from her panting chest, making the white lupine blush a bit, but his teeth gritted, and he groaned as her now wet, slick fingers slipped along the underside of his throbbing cock, and pressed the top of it against the soaking wet crease of her folds through the negligible negligee. Alps then gave a long, experimental stroke of his hips, feeling the pressure of those wet fingers under, and the smooth, slick panties over, not at all unlike a nice, deep penetration as he pushed forward and back. He trembled, and Nidaja groaned too, the stroke felt over her tingling clit.

Slowly, the lupine slave began to move his hips, pleasuring himself between the general’s fingers and sex, the panties only a promising barrier soon to be broken if their passions continued to flare. Alps bit the side of his lover’s neck as his hips began a more fevered motion, stroking back and forth as the general’s other hand slipped over the wolf’s shoulders, gripping him as one leg stayed up, hooked over the back of his own to keep that pussy easy to stroke. She began to puff out hot panting breaths, her eyes closed, head forward. Her hips began to stroke back against the slave’s own, the pleasure of it apparently not much less than it was for her lover.

“I want you to cum like this...” Alps growls demanding. “Let it happen. I want to feel you soak your silks for me.”

“Unng...” Nidaja panted, hips jerking softly as she pressed him tighter to her covered folds. “Faster... If you want to feel me soak you, you... have to pump faster...” The slave folded his ears back at that, not sure if he could do it faster for very long without just squirting his lust into those stroking fingertips. The general was rubbing him as if to masturbate herself through that stroking cock, which was only making the sensation of each stroke more intense and wild.

“Alright love... but you better not hold back. I want to feel you pop over me!” he grunted hips thumping against her own. She squeaked hotly, hand gripping his shoulder tighter as he bit her neck firmly. Hips bucking faster, the pair began to thump up against the wall, and Nidaja even tried to shush her lover a little to get him to calm down, fearing they may wake their neighbors in the next room. The slave would not relent however, being more forceful with her now than she’d ever felt before.

In the end, it was that forcefulness that drove her to her peak. Her body tightened after only a few moments of this “punishment” and then she trembled heavily before Alps actually heard the spattering of wetness on the hardwood floor. Nidaja cried out loudly, then clapped her muzzle shut, trying hard to stifle it

as her cheeks flared out. The wolf felt her head wetting his thighs as his hips ground into hers, and then he just could not resist any more. He gripped her with both hands behind her and growled out commandingly,

“Pull your silks to the side. I have something to give to you now.” The wolf stressed the word now almost desperately, indicating to Nidaja that it was not going to wait much longer. She squeaks rapturously and moved her hand off of his stroking cock, and pulled the crotch of those panties to the side with her fingertips, before the white-furred slave angled his hips slightly lower, and then caused the general to cry out loudly as nine inches of need penetrated her still quivering depths. The general arched her back, throwing another leg around her lover’s hips and leaning back against the wall, pinned between him and the wall with both feet off the floor as Alps slammed into her deeply!

“Yes! Yes, fuck me, love, don’t stop! Fill meeee!” she cried, yelping out as Alps swatted her rump for perhaps just speaking out of turn. Besides, it was unnecessary to tell him to do that, she would have had to injure him badly to stop it from being the next thing to happen anyway. His hips ground tightly into her own, and her fingers slipped back between them, pushing and stroking at her little clit as he felt her muscles contract around his thick, flaring cock.

“Yes!” alps barked, “Cum again, Nidaja, cum around me, I wanna feel you squeeze me inside you before I flood that heat right back inside you!” he snarled, knowing talking dirty was not common for him, but as aggressive as he was being, he couldn’t help it. Apparently, for Nidaja, it did the trick. She yowled loudly, ears back, eyes widening so much that he could see the whites of them, and then he was treated to long, rhythmic squeezes internally, and felt hot wetness running down his inner thighs as it spilled over the dock of Nidaja’s tail. She curled into a ball against him, between him and the wall, and Alps finally just let go to enjoy her completely.

The general no longer protested the noise they were making as his hips pistoned furiously into hers, thumping her lower back against the wall as he bounced her in his lap against the wall, her toes spread as her legs gripped around his lower back. She occasionally squeaked out as the natural rhythm of their sexual frenzy would push her over the edge again and again, but the odd position, coupled with the fact that he was holding most of Nidaja’s weight, made the wolf’s focus a little divided, so he was not able to just explode as naturally as he might if they were on the bed. The wolf slave was sure that the general did not mind in the slightest, however, as the wetness splashed lewdly between them.

Finally, Alps grunted heavily as he felt the aching need for release boil within him. He rutted harder with Nidaja, bouncing her firmly against the wall, face contorted in pleased fury, his muscles straining to hold her as they tired from the exertion, but the heat only made him want it more. A picture frame fell

on a dress that was close enough to the wall to get jarred a bit. The general clamped down around her lover and made it feel like she was suckling him inside her again every time he lurched into her. Alps simply and unceremoniously exploded, spewing thick streamers off his lust into the convulsing depths of a frantically orgasming general. The combination of their thick, hot fluids spilled between the lupine's parted feet, Nidaja's feet still up near his shoulders as she folded in half and wailed with heavenly release! Alps ached from how hard he released into Nidaja. It had been a while since he felt that kind of climax in his own body, and it seemed almost as strange suddenly as the first time he felt a climax in Nidaja's body. The thought of all of the experiences that both bodies shared, and that he knew exactly, without a shadow of doubt, how the general was feeling now, only made the intensity of the emotional exchange between them even more intense!

For several minutes, the two writhed and pitched against one another, letting Alps fully spend himself in those claiming depths, before finally he moved his hands under the general's rump and the slave staggered over to the bed, dropping himself and the still tensing and relaxing green wolf female onto it, his hips gyrating slowly to stir the intimate soup they had created in that tight passage. Alps rumbled softly,

"I think... I am gonna rather enjoy being more spirited and dominant." His panting words flowed in staggered puffs. Nidaja sprawled a bit, finally moving her legs from around his back, splaying heavily on the bed, feeling that twitching, hot cock bounce and throb inside her as the wolf enjoyed slow sexual aftershocks. After a bit off silence, she murmured, with a smirk,

"I think we *all* will enjoy that, Alps." before chuckling softly, and embracing her lover in that familiar, welcoming room at the Luca inn.

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The drying leaves of the trees outside of town rustled softly as Chana leaned back against the quality wood paneled wall of her classy den, and looked at the guest she had invited into her home at the recommendation of one of her less reputable contacts. The cloaked figure gazed at her from under a dark hood from across the expensively carpeted floor, standing stark still and silent. Chana wrung her hands expectantly as she watched the tea she had served her guest cool in its small, green cup, the sweet scent filling the room like incense. There was a lengthened silence as the guest sipped at the tea calmly.

"So we understand one another? You cannot be seen, and you cannot be caught. This cannot be linked to me. I just want a clean, simple death. I just want an end to a wretched life that should never have been allowed in the first place. He has brought humility to me, and as the last in my family line, it's a

humility my family name will be marked for. Your kind understands the importance of honor.” The tan-furred lupine female growled with sickened resolve. She had, by the look of her, not slept in two days or more, and had been furious the entire time.

The dark figure remained silent as they listened. Chana watched quietly as the figure nodded.

“Good, we have an understanding. Four Thousand is what I will pay. That’s what he promised me when he got me up in the middle of the night to assault me and humiliate me. When I know proof of his death, come to me, and I will pay it to you.

“I don’t want your money.” The dark, robed figure said in a soft, perfect tone.

“You are an assassin. My sources were able to retain your services with the understanding that your rates are reasonable.”

“I don’t have rates. Your sources never sent me. I came on my own.” The cold feminine voice whispered again.

“What do you want then? You had better not be wasting my time, criminal. I asked you if you were here to do the work I offered! You said yes, so why are you really here!” Chana bristled, moving forward to the dark figure, pulling a small round table between them and putting a bag of gold onto it. “This is not a joke. I intend to buy a reliable service, and if you are not as reliable as to stake money on it, then you would be better to leave now and sip my tea no longer. Do you know the trouble it would cause for you if I told the guards here that a Lhap islander was in the vicinity? You’d be hunted down like the heathen trouble maker you are.”

The dark figure pulled her hood off, and silver gleaming fox eyes peered at the tan female wolf. The black fox female with silver hair and markings stared coldly at Chana. She spoke slowly and evenly.

“I’m not a Lhap. The work you had to be done was the unfortunate matter of murder. You asked me if I was here to do this work, and I am. There had not been, up to that point, any establishment of just who it was I would kill. I will not slaughter an innocent boy for your pride. I will not take your money to commit murder.” The dark vulpine whispered casually.

“Then get out of my house, and get out of town as fast as you can. The guards will be on your heels, Lhap.” Chana hissed.

“Not until I finish my tea.” came the fox’s reply, as she held the saucer in one hand, bringing it up in front of her with a coy smile, eyes closed as she brought the little cup to her lips to sip it pleasantly. Chana seethed at the perceived insult, and wrenched her slender, quick arm out to slap the cup and saucer out of the fox’s hands.

The little saucer hovered in the air for a brief second before clattering to the table as the black fox’s free hand vanished, and Chana felt a stabbing agonizing impact on her own wrist just before it arrived to strike the cup and saucer. Chana recoiled and wailed in pain as she gripped her arm, the dull, burning throb telling her that her wrist was broken as she wrenched it from the fox’s grasp and the fox finished her warm sip of tea her expression unchanged.

Chana moved her uninjured hand to her waist and drew the fine silver dagger, long and slender, that Alps had left for her. She barked out furiously, “You’re dead you filthy fox-whore!” her scream in both rage and agony as she lurched forward with the knife. The fox, so quick, intercepted her and she jumped back, gritting her teeth as her opponent wrenched her wrist painfully, making her drop the knife which the fox caught as Chana started at her, stunned. The cup and saucer placed neatly on the table, she stood and pulled Chana close, the long silver blade held before both their eyes.

“Such lovely work, this knife...” came the fox’s calmly reflective tone. “... and you ...”

“Who are ...?” Chana asked, but she was cut off by the fox who leaned in close to the once demure female and to her shock, kissed her. Her eyes went wide with confusion and fear as she stared into the gleaming, unusual silver eyes of that vixen. The tan-furred lupine began to feel light headed, and then... wet? She reached up, putting a hand on the side of her own neck, but even before her hand reached her neck she could feel the hot warmth of her own blood. Out of the corner of her eye she could see the knife, now dripping blood, her blood, onto the floor.

“You make a very pleasant cup of tea.” The fox answered matter-of-factly, as if she had not just ended her host’s life.

“You monster...” Chana said, going to her knees, and then slumping back onto her rump, against the wood-paneled wall. “You’re just ... a murderer.” She half gasped, and half choked, speaking and breathing both becoming difficult as her throat began to throb with a dull but steadily growing pain.

“...And knowing that, you still invited me in for tea.” The vulpine said, carefully cleaning the slender elegant knife on a once neatly folded napkin. “And really... I’m so much more.”

“Fuck... you...” Chana replied, the light of life slipping out of her eyes, her consciousness very soon to follow. Her hand, now soaked, fell away from her throat, letting her life’s blood spurt freely onto the floor while she watched, horrified and no longer able to blink.

“How very sad for the beauty of history that your last words should be so uninspiring, Chana. I know you have but seconds left, but let me fill them with one little thought. My freedom to come here was given to me by the power of the one you would have me kill. His hands are clean, but Chana... Alps was your undoing after all.”

As the fox spoke those words, she sheathed the knife and placed it in her robes, watching the light of life fall into shadow in those horrified, dying lupine eyes. Silently, the vixen left the dark, quiet house. Dried autumn-kissing deciduous leaves rustled in the dark of night in the distance, marking, quiet and uncaring, the passing of Luca’s regional matriarch



## Sirius, Book III

### The Essence

*Comments or Questions?*

Contact Alps: [sarsis@gmail.com](mailto:sarsis@gmail.com)

Or just drop a note at: <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/sarsis/>

## Chapter 8

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The bite of rope into Alps' wrists reminded him that he and Neit seemed to have an inescapable history with being bound. It reminded him of the thief's assault upon him on the rooftop garden in Diera. She seemed to have grown since then. Perhaps he had too. He plodded along in front of Neit quietly, watching around warily, his hands bound behind his back. The rope was cut just under the knot, so if he got into trouble, he could break away. For whatever good that would do him, since he wasn't really a fighter. The white lupine hoped that when this was all over, he could take more fighting lessons from Nidaja. He was starting to feel like he was eventually just going to need to know, even if his rightful place was the peaceful home and bedroom of the queen.

It was after midnight, and the streets were still active. This was something Alps had always liked about Jalana. One had more time to get things done because it seemed like the city was always ready for activity. There was no activity on the streets above they were interested in, as Neit led the slave into a small, squat building, one that looked as if it were about ready to fall on its own. There was a spiral staircase in the center of this otherwise unassuming building, whose only intention was apparently housing this staircase into the subterranean passages below.

Alps wrinkled his nose as he walked ahead of Neit, pushed along gently, as she seemed to know where she was going. He rumbled softly to her as they walked, his voice soft as if fearful of calling attention to them even as they walked into certain danger.

"Guh... Neit, if this place smelled better, I might be willing to call it a sewer." The white lupine's feet were careful, as if he were vehemently afraid of stepping on the source of that smell. Neit prodded him from behind.

"You'd be surprised how fast you get used to it when you have to live down here, and how quick you become unaware that the stench is in your fur, and everyone else can smell it but you." she stated to him. The male felt a pang of guilt, realizing that she knew this from experience, and even his life with Chana didn't leave him that offensive to others. Being tolerably clean was a right he'd always enjoyed, even if not overly attractive or healthy.

There were torches along the walls, leaving black oily marks along it. There were only one or two per bend in the underground passageway, which left it precariously dark inside, but Neit walked with the certainty of someone who had plodded around down there for months. Alps smiled a bit. Her life was about to change. No more sewer life for her. He was still afraid down here, however. Even with Nidaja following not too far behind, ready to take down the Asuna criminals who had placed the price on Alps' head in an attempt to have him kidnapped.

The lack of moving air, of any wind, didn't make this place any warmer. It seemed perpetually cold and clammy, which did not lend itself well to comforting Alps about this plan, even with the knowledge that Nidaja would never let harm come to him. More and more it was just feeling like an unnecessary level of risk. Nidaja seemed to feel this route was the only sure way to get a good idea that the Asuna were willing to go through the lengths they were advertising to get him, however, and proof to the general that the actual Asuna governing body was involved in the crime, and not just a smaller group or individual.

After about half an hour of winding, uneventful and quiet walking, which left Alps so lost he could not hope to have ever left this place on his own, the thief and slave approached what looked like a small underground shack, looking as dilapidated and poor as anything Alps had ever seen. There was a dark figure standing outside of it, robed and quiet. When Alps and Neit came into the light, more than adequate in this antechamber, the figure immediately recognized what Alps was, and went into the shack. A moment later, two individuals exited the shack, looking very much unlike anyone Alps had ever seen.

Tall and muscular, there was a male Asuna who came out first. He had to be half a head taller than Alps, his fur a light tan mostly with his ears and muzzle and hands a deep chocolate color, and a myriad of smallish spots in all the lighter tan fur. His head was adorned with thick, spiky copper-colored hair, jutting out and sticking up at impossible angles. He wore dark brushed scale mail armor over his chest, a hauberk which came down over his hips, and dark leather pants with black plates stitched to the front of his thighs. He wore black boots with black metal shin guards, and had the same black metal bracers on his forearms. His forehead was somewhat covered by heavy-looking silver and black goggles, which as out of place as they were, didn't seem too far fetched, given the unusual creature they were on.

After him arrived a female Asuna, actually a little shorter than Alps, and looking a little more refined, wearing just bulky-looking leather armor and a crimson shirt and dark pants which didn't completely cover her legs. She seemed lean and wiry, a bit like Neit. Her fur was a dusty grey color with black spots, ears, and muzzle. Her hair was also coppery, like the male's, but was fanned all in one neat direction, and cut short in the back, not nearly so spiky. She was, at Alps' first glance, somewhat exotic and beautiful. He was pushed

along, up to the front of the little hut. He looked up into the eyes of the male hyena. His eyes were narrow and serious, and he seemed extremely dangerous, a scar along the left side of his muzzle showing he was no stranger to fighting. There was a big nick in the same ear that lined up in such a way as it might have been the result of the same incident. He had just barely gotten his head out of the way of a blade, the wolf was sure. Neit spoke softly, and uneasily. It was obvious that she was afraid of these two.

“Uh... I ... I brought you this Alps. Um... This slave from the queen. For the reward.” Her words betrayed her familiarity with him, which Alps hoped was not obvious to the pair.

“You are using your body then, yis? To get this one?” came the male’s deep, breathy reply. It was such a strong, willful voice. Alps folded his ears back at the connotation.

“What do you mean?” Neit asked. Alps already knew what he meant. An Asuna nose was a powerful tool, it seemed, and bathe though Alps might, he knew.

“You are trapping heem with promise of pleasure to your body.” The male offered again, nodding. “We are not to be paying more for this, no.” he shook his head. “This trick you do on your own. We do not pay for the mating with too, just the bringing him here.” His accent was fairly thick, as Alps listened, but he got the general idea. The deal was to bring Alps, but they were not going to pay Neit more because she had sex with him first. They thought she used the sex to trap him. Neit blushed as she realized they could smell the sex on him. Alps then had another painful thought. If Nidaja was closing in, they’d probably know it before she got there. It might go very bad.

“Brother, I should be taking our guest to be wearing more concealing attire for the traveling inside.” The girl, with similar difficulty speaking common, offered. “It ees being hard enough to move heem unwilling without all knowing his look.” The male put his hand on the hilt of a sword which was strapped upside down along his back that Alps had not even noticed before. It was short, but heavy-looking, curved forward at a weird angle. It was definitely a brutal hacking implement. A kukri style blade made for use as a tool just as much as a weapon. Alps immediately feared for the safety of the thief.

“If you think to betray me, I would have you know that a letter rests comfortably in an undisclosed postbox with confession to my crime, and full implication of the Asuna in its contents.” Neit stated flatly, the defense Nidaja felt would prevent them from painfully altering their deal. “I don’t know what you need the slave for, and it’s none of my business, but you *will* pay me and let me leave safely. I’m not daft.” Alps found something alarmingly natural in the way she bartered with her life. It was likely this was the very life she was leaving

behind. He was surprised she made it this far alive if this was a common occurrence.

“Yis, gurl, I dun intend to alter our deal. The money ees here, fret not.” The male stated, frowning at Neit. His demeanor was so cold and professional and strong. His voice was smooth and deep and comforting. Alps could not help but think that Nidaja might actually find that attractive if he were to emulate it. Neit nodded, still fidgeting.

“Where are you taking him?” she asked, obviously meaning the question toward the girl hyena, who was attempting to take the rope from Neit. The girl answered her.

“Into hut to get clothing to hide him. We are not wanting the guard to see we take him from this city. Asuna is not staying underground all the way home.” She barked at Neit, seeming irritated with her questioning.

“Reika.” Came a stern voice from her “brother”. The girl looked up.

“They not needing to even know we taking him to homeland. It ees not being part of deal.” He shook a finger in a scolding fashion.

“They ees not needing my name either.” She shook her finger back to him. He rubbed the back of his head at his own mistake. The two looked at each other a moment and then the male looked up a second, and spoke.

“Tanayl’kum holignamur aynordun gunock.” The words were strange to Alps, and he could not get a single inkling of meaning from them, especially given the calm, icy demeanor of the male hyena who spoke them. The girl nodded.

“Yis, yis, come come. We ees getting a robe on you, then we can pack up camp and get ready. You ees good for carrying heavy things, yis? Slave boy?” Reika asked. Alps nodded and looked plaintively at Neit and she looked back at him. Nidaja would have to intervene soon, but was likely waiting until the two hyena were separated. The big male alone was problem enough! Alps prepared to break his ropes as he was led inside the small hut. Inside it was dark. He felt the bindings on his wrist being untied. This, at least, he was thankful for, but it made sense. He’d have a problem getting on a robe with his hands tied behind his back. At least the pair was not unreasonable. He then felt an embrace from behind.

“What are you doing?” Alps asked in the quiet darkness.

“Rios ees being pleased, I think. You ees nice to look at. She ees being pleased with us, yis? Ees long trip. White wulf needing to rest.” Alps jerked

slightly as he felt a soft object, some kind of pillow, pushed into his muzzle. He inhaled suddenly to suck in the air to shout for help, but inhaling was exactly the *wrong* thing to do. There was something in the little pillow. There were some acrid fumes. Then, Alps felt his muscles just vanish. He felt like he was falling, even in the girl's embrace, and she pulled him up against her, and walked out the back of the cabin with him. The last thing he remembered seeing before muted foamy darkness took his mind, was an odd looking boat with a heavy-looking metal cylinder on the back. His last thought was simply an apology to Nita. Wherever he was going, for whatever reason, he knew it would be trouble for her. Then nothing.

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Outside the cabin where Alps was being "dressed" Neit stood with the male. There was a pause for reflection, before the thief murmured, "Is Reika getting the money from inside as well? How long will it take for you to break camp?" she was stalling, not sure where Nidaja was.

"There ees no money for betrayal, leetle wulf gurl." came the frozen reply of the male hyena. Neit's heart sank. They knew. Somehow, they knew. She said a silent prayer in the back of her mind that Nidaja was close, and could at least limit the injuries she was about to receive. She stated softly,

"The Asuna will be implicated. Killing me won't stop that. The royal house already knows, and they are already here." the thief said shakily.

"They ees one more gurl, you are meaning?" the male hyena asked. "Yis, I know they are here. I know for a while now. She can be coming out. We are tiring of sneaky bitch in shadows." he said, his tone never changing, even as he used strong words, as if bitch were not meant as an insult, but merely another word for girl. With those words of challenge, Nidaja appeared, her hands already holding a long, slender blade. Neit tightened up. The threat already apparent, this hyena might just cut her down. She bolted off to the side to be a couple strides away from him in case he made that decision.

"Neit! I'll worry about him, you get Alps out of the hut, and get him away from the fight!" she barked. "Alps! Break free, *move!*" There was silence from the hut.

"Ees too late, yis?" came that smooth, almost sensual male voice from the hyena. Neit froze. What did too late mean? Nidaja gritted her teeth and gripped her sword.

"If you hurt him, you'll wish I was only going to kill you!" she shouted, and launched herself at the male. He simply side-stepped and caught Nidaja's swinging arm, then wrenching her, and throwing her with a quick, powerful movement, letting her own momentum be used against her. Nidaja's very capable balance kicked in, and she landed on her feet, skidding. "Neit! *Get Alps!*" she yelled again. Neit turned toward the little shack, and then yelped as it shuddered with a loud roar. The thief backpedaled and held her head as Nidaja got ready for an attack from the hyena, letting him take the lead this time. He stood his ground and smiled as something moved from behind the cabin. There was a channel of water that had been behind it, not visible from the darkness in the antechamber, and upon that channel was a boat. On the back of the boat was a bright metal cylinder with tubes and framework and bracketing making it seem very complex, and from the back of that cylinder came a long band of brilliant blue fire. The boat came into view slowly, but left view faster than Nidaja thought remotely possible.

"No, Alps!" Neit cried. Nidaja roared with fury.

"What was that?! That slave had better not have been on that, you wretch!" Nidaja exclaimed, taking a few very direct swings at the male's extremities, as if trying to hack him off at the elbows and knees. It seemed all too easy, even with his size, for him to avoid Nidaja's speed and accuracy. Neit was starting to get an idea why the hyenas were feared in combat. Their sense of detecting movements and intentions from their opponents made them very hard targets! The hyena only smiled at Nidaja.

"You ees thinking we was not having plan for these things? We ees Asuna, of course wolfs betray us. Money ees here though, if you ees wanting it? Queen is happier to have something instead of nothing? She be mad if you bring back no money and no slave, no?" he stated, his body not even seeming tense. Nidaja inhaled deeply, seeming to try to calm herself. Neit gaped at Nidaja for so easily altering her style to fit the opponent. Violent, fast action was useless against the hyena just yet.

"You seem to misunderstand, bright-spots." she stated coldly. "If we do not get that wolf back, or if any harm comes to him, the queen will not look at this as the theft of her slave. That was her chosen life mate you just took. You are about to start an all out war." Neit cupped her muzzle. It was true, of course. Nita would likely go right for the throat of the Asuna over the loss of Alps. It would not even matter to her if they had noble reasons for taking him. This seemed to cause a flutter in the hyena's willful stance.

"More wulf trickery." he spat at the general. "We ees having at least local scrips. Thing like marriage of queen is big news happening. Nothing ever about it. Who ees you for knowing the personal life of queen? You ees town guard making things up now." he barked. Nidaja reached into her hip-pouch and drew

a golden medallion, holding it cupped in her palm at the hyena. It was her royal seal. The hyena growled loudly and backed up.

"I am General Nidaja Razelle, sister by blood to Queen Nita Razelle, and you'll get violence from me, you'll get cunning and power, strength and justice... but you will get no lies, Asuna." The male looked down a moment, fists balled up, Nidaja held her sword at the ready. This one now knew he was sinking his teeth into a dragon, not a snake. The general expected him to act as a cornered animal.

"Asuna ees not interested in more war." the male said. "We ees pushed too much and pulled too much so to break, it ees not intent for starting war. If you ees speaking truth, then Asuna is admitting mistake, and return slave when we ees finding out. Never was intent for harming him. My nose finds liars. Always finds them." He poked at his black, wet nose. "You ees not found. You ees who you say, and your story ees still impossible. Why ees no scrips talk about white wulf for queen's mate?" he asked. Nidaja did not put down her sword, even as he seemed to present no additional threat.

"Alps' relationship to Nita was secret because it's a social blunder for someone of her class to openly consort with a slave in such a way. But, if you know anything about love..." she growled.

"Ees no rules for love. No rules to bind it, no rules to break it. No force to tame it, I am knowing this. And still you not lie. You ees being true. The Asuna ees making mistake, and I apologize. But no way is to catch Reika. She is being out of city already." The male rumbled sadly. "Ees sorry." he hung his head.

"Sorry?!" Neit barked, striding over to the male. She took a swing at him, which connected with his jaw, but left the thief gripping her hand and cursing. He nodded, seemingly unfazed by it.

"This city's huge. She can't be out already." Nidaja barked.

"Aquaduct ees straight. Straight to make it not block up for storms. It goes to ocean, yis?" the hyena stated. Nidaja nodded. She knew this much at least. It wasn't her first time in the aqueducts on Alps' account, after all. The hyena continued, "Boat Reika ees having, ees special, Just for today. Just for stealing slave. It ees moving fifty times faster than slink runs. Asuna not lie. Boat is on ocean, and moving still farther by now. Asuna apologizes. You would be having to go all the way to Asuna home with me to get him back, and he still be there for days before we get to him." he stated, his spiky mane even seeming a bit downcast over this blunder. He did seem genuinely sorry for it.

"Then pack your things, and we will get moving." Nidaja stated. Neit balked.

"That ees being... not so good idea for wulfs to go right to Asuna home." The male stated, seeming almost in shock that it would be suggested.

"You have me in Asuna home, or you have my army there. Your choice." She stated.

"I am packing things, yis." The male replied.

"How do we know he won't just kill us and escape?" Neit burst, seeming in a frenzy over how bad an idea this was. "The Asuna serve Mannus! They build his armies! They create Uruk!" she said, as if Nidaja had somehow forgotten.

"They don't do it because they want to." Stated Nidaja flatly.

"Again general is true. Asuna is not enjoying being slave to Mannus. We is wanting nothing of it, but homes is already overrun. Wulf will have same fate soon. Mannus will overrun, and then all just build Uruk." He said with a nod.

"How does that mean we will survive the trip?" Neit asked sternly.

"You won't be going." Nidaja stated. "You will be providing the queen with my message, and preventing the war from happening until I get back. If I am not back in what Misty deems a reasonable amount of time, your information is all my sister needs to... redirect our military attention for a while." the Asuna nodded to that, understanding. Neit was to be insurance that nothing happened to Nidaja.

"Not that I mind not going to that horrible place and dying, but how is both you and Alps getting killed supposed to help the empire?" Neit said sharply.

"Don't forget, you work for me now. You will follow your order immediately. I will not repeat myself. There is no more bounty for you, and my royal seal will grant you safe and free passage right to the queen's throne. Take it, and travel quickly to Diera. We need to prevent unnecessary bloodshed at any cost."

"You speak wisdom." The hyena stated.

"Asuna, you said they are taking him to the city, and he will get there before we do. Will he be safe? You said your intent was not to harm him." The general stated. "Why did the Asuna take him?"

"Rios ees saying to take him, because he ees being Letai." The male said simply.



“Rios? The empress wanted him? But their purpose for him? Why do they need a Letai?” the general asked.

“I am not knowing. Rios ees knowing. We do not ask questions of empress.” he stated flatly.

“But you feel that she won’t hurt him? He’s not a sacrifice to Mannus is he? If Mannus thinks any Letai are left, he’ll..” Nidaja faltered, apparently not wanting to think about what would happen.

“It ees being worse. If Mannus ees knowing that Letai is able to get out of dark crystals, he ees finding some worse thing to do. Rios being very specific in who ees chosen to get wulf. Only trusted people. Reika and me, we talked about it also. Rios is wanting not for Mannus to know. Rumors perhaps, but no one says we taking him, and no one saying we having him. Rios means to move against the dark one. This is contempt. This is dangerous, we know. But she is wanting to get Letai before Mannus. Not knowing why.” Stated the hyena. Nidaja nodded to that, and crossed her arms. She then handed her seal to Neit. The general stated,

“You are now a royal envoy. Go. Be quick about it. This needs to remain as secret as you can make it until you get to the queen. I don’t want additional rumors about this to get out.” Nidaja barked commandingly to Neit. The thief nodded to this, and bowed.

“You have my word on my honor.” She stated solidly. “Secrets are the only thing I’ve ever had until now. I won’t blow it.” she stated, and then turned and started off, looking back and saying, “Get him back safe?” Nidaja nodded, and the thief bolted off into the dark, winding underbelly of Jalana.

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The white slave lupine looked around him. It was black. He immediately knew it was another dream. It felt the same as the dreams he’d had of Luna. It was not so real as actually being in a Shadowfall crystal, but it was definitely that kind of place. As the darkness faded around him, like the grey dawn rising on an overcast day, he could tell that it was the same ruined landscape, the wasteland the Letai were forced to wander in their nightmare existence within the Shadowfall. It looked empty as before, so he decided to walk in one direction, hoping it would take him quickly to the focus of his dream this time. Why would he dream of Luna again? He’d already freed her. Before, he had assumed that she had somehow called out to him, because of whatever link he had with the crystal, but now? Was there someone else calling out? Would he have to go

back into these crystals often to free others? He'd been thinking about it ever since the discussion Neit and Nidaja had about it being too dangerous. Was the danger so great that they could not try to free others from an eternity of loneliness?

As he walked, Alps became aware of something he had never felt in the Shadowfall. Wind. It was at his back. He began to move faster in the direction he was already going. Wind meant an opening. Was there an opening in this Shadowfall? What was this dream even about? If the person had somehow left, there was not likely much reason for him to be here. As he came up over a hill, down in the bottom of a very distinct crater, was a gash in the air, pulling the air rapidly into it, glowing bright white. The slave blinked at it. The crater had been formed by the long weathering of that wind pulling the landscape with it into the hole, which stayed at the bottom. Had someone punched out of it? He slid down the slope into the crater, and walked cautiously toward the hole, but as he got even a little closer, he lost his footing, and yelped as he was sucked in.

The dream did not meet with any improvement on the other side. Alps found himself suspended in a space where every direction could have been up or down. There were chunks of land floating around, colliding with one another, and dark shapes bounced around like shadows that were cast on plain air, as if some kind of barely visible creature, as well as massive flying shapes moving in the distance. They reminded him of the dragons from stories in the library, tales of fantastic massive creatures that were simply unbelievable even to his open mind, and there they were. The wolf tumbled around, startled at first, but finding himself oddly not truly fearful. There was something sickeningly familiar about it. There was something almost comforting about this place.

He used the will-to-move that he'd used inside the Shadowfall, and found that it not only worked, but it was far more effective here. In minutes, he was racing along in one direction, and able to quickly stop and change directions. It felt even more natural to him than walking did. He could not hide the fact that it was exhilarating. He could not remember ever feeling so free. Even the dark shapes of the dragons in the distance, and the fleeting glimpses of other "creatures" here did not really frighten him. He felt strangely peaceful and immune. Until he saw a shape he knew. He stopped instantly in mid air, looking blankly at it.

On one of the floating rocks, one with unusual sigils and designed carved into it, stood the silver-haired black fox he had freed from the crystal Luna and Ceriss had been in. He sped over to her, and stopped right in front of her.

"Hello. What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Only waiting." she stated in that usual cryptic voice.

"Waiting for what?" Alps asked. Her riddles were always so far beyond his understanding.

"To find out what happens next." she stated.

"What do you think happens next?" the lupine asked.

"You wake up." she said blankly.

And Alps woke up.

He could not really move. He found himself very securely tied down in the bottom of the boat that he had been placed in by Reika. He remembered the darkness, the muffled cry as he found himself being abducted, right out from under Nidaja and Neit's noses. The fact that he was still in the boat told Alps that Reika had succeeded. Were his friends okay? Surely Nidaja would not have been bested in combat. Alps squeaked out, trying to move, but his muscles were still numb from whatever had been used to knock him out.

"You won't be up and about for a while, wulf." came Reika's voice. Alps could not turn his head to look up at her. He could not really move his head. It was such a far cry from the freedom he felt in the dream. "Your muscles ees still being useless from the sleeping poison." she said. "If you ees trying to move, you ees unable to keep from peeing." the hyena girl explained. Alps promptly wet himself while trying to reflect on that. He rolled his eyes, inwardly hating Reika immediately for it. The girl rumbled, "See, there you go. Now you ees having to clean boat, thanks."

Alps rode in silence for another thirty minutes or so, realizing a few simple things in the process. They were out in the open because there was sunlight. They were on the boat, as there was occasionally the slap of water underneath it, and they were moving pretty quickly, from how the craft lurched occasionally. He also realized that there was a constant dull roar from the cylinder that was at the back of the boat. He was very groggy and disoriented for much of that time. When he finally got to where he could move a little, it didn't really matter, since he was tied down. The next thing he realized is that Reika was very talkative, but she wasn't talking to him, and no one else was on the boat. She spoke in her native tongue, which seemed so crude and guttural to Alps, but he felt it also sounded a little like Letai too, if a little jagged and hard. Occasionally the hyena girl spoke softly as if chatting with a friend, and at other times, harsh, as if in an argument. Alps began to feel a bit put off for not being at least privy to why she was talking, and finally spoke up.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked. Reika stopped talking for a moment. She then spoke again.

"I taking to you to Asuna big city." she stated flatly.

"Why?" Alps asked simply.

"Because we is paid heavy gold for bringing you." the girl replied just as frankly. Alps sighed, able to move his head up to look at her. He tensed a little. The girl was holding a heavy looking massive bone club. The wolf could not imagine a creature who would even have a bone like that. It was painted in blood red paint with thick, angry-looking stripes, and adorned with feathers at the base of it's leather-wrapped "handle". The thing had odd, ridiculous-looking "eyes" painted near the bulbous head of the club, which stood out and drew a lot of attention. The slave decided that Reika expected him to resist, and had plans for that should it occur.

"Who is paying you?" Alps asked, thinking perhaps from the male hyena's conversation with her that Reika was not so good at filtering their plan. Besides, he was going to find out anyway when he got where they were going.

"Asuna Leader, Rios Dominis." She answered flatly. Alps blinked at that. It had been the rumor that the high council at least was involved in paying for the task of capturing him, but to hear that their empress was the one responsible was a little shocking. He pushed forward with questioning since it was at least more enjoyable than sitting in the bottom of the boat, urine soaked and listening to the hyena speak in her native tongue to nobody.

"What does Rios want with me?" he asked. Reika yammered away in her native tongue for a bit, and then said softly,

"Bone says you question too much. You ees being quiet now, so I ees not being in trouble later for too much talking." The girl nodded with some finality. Alps looked at the girl quizzically. Was there someone else on board he was not seeing?

"Bone? Who is B-" he tried to say, and then found that club thrust into his face, those silly googley eyes staring him down. Alps' mind faltered a little. The one she'd been talking to all this time. It had been her club. This did not bring any comfort at all to the slave. The girl was insane. The large bone club with the goofy looking eyes talked to her, and only she could hear it.

"That is Bone?" Alps asked, simply having to clarify it, and his situation, for himself.

"That ees Bone." Reika said. "You should leesen to heem."

"I can't hear him." the wolf murmured softly.

“Only I can hear heem.” the girl stated proudly. Alps whined at the back of his throat. He knew it. He lurched a little, trying to sit up, to at least get up off the wet bottom of the boat. Why could they not stop and at least get cleaned up.

“Bone...” he said softly, unable to believe that he was about to try this. By how Reika talked, Bone was in control of the girl, so perhaps her rational side was forced onto the object somehow. If he could appeal to that side of her personality, he might be a little more productive.

“Bone ees leestening.” Reika said, looking out over the water. Alps could see more now too. There was land off to the left, so he felt they were likely going south down the coast from Jalana. It was daylight so they had been traveling all night. There was a haze of blue coming from the back of the cylinder that was roaring, which Alps knew to be very hot fire. What weird kind of object was this? Beneath that, taking up much of the back of the boat, was a large metal tank, perhaps carrying the fuel that the cylinder was burning.

“Bone, I’m not a fighter, and I am hopelessly lost at this point, and probably in enemy territory, so I don’t intend to escape or try to harm Reika. I just want to know what’s to become of me. That’s not an unreasonable question.” the slave said softly. There was a bit of a pause.

“Bone say’s you ees smelling like wulf pee.” the hyena stated.

“I can’t do much about that right now.” he churred.

“We stop soon, coming to place where we walk. We get you into ocean and make you smell like saltwater. Ees nicer.” Reika explained. It still didn’t explain what was to become of Alps, but he decided he would wait until he’d been cleaned up to pressure her and the club for more answers.

So, the white lupine remained quiet, half-sitting as the boat pushed along the calm surf. It was a rather pretty day overall, and it would count as a nice ride in an amazing contraption if it were not for the outstanding fact that he was being kidnapped, had wet himself, and his only company was an insane Asuna. Inside of half an hour more of travel, they changed course, the girl seeming to have pretty precise control of the boat. They slipped into a little cave at the end of an inlet pretty far up a wide river that emptied into the ocean. It would have been easily three miles or so inland. The terrain was something a little different than Alps was really used to. There were open prairies and short, squat trees, and a great deal more wind than he was used to. The land seemed entirely different. How long had he been out? Was it really this different south of where he lived? He’d been pretty far in all directions to the sparse towns near Luca to get things for Chana, but had never seen a place like this.

“Get into water. Get clean.” Reika said flatly. Alps did as he was told, not wanting Bone to have to tell him to do it. Reika stood close watch in case Alps tried anything funny. He still felt a little numb from whatever was used to knock him out. He hoped it was not a permanent effect. That was really powerful stuff, whatever it was. After getting out of the water, the slave took off his clothes, and pressed them against the rocks to try to get them dry. The slave had long since lost any self-consciousness about his bare body because of Nita and her friends, so it was not until he was folding and pressing his trousers that he realized he’d just stripped naked in front of Reika. He looked up at the shore, to see if she might be displeased that he was nude, even if he was pretty obscured by the water. She seemed to be in a pretty heated argument with “Bone” so it didn’t seem she noticed or cared. Alps finished, got out of the water, and pressed the water in downward sweeping strokes out of his fur, and prepared to put his clothing back on. He had been wearing the sort of clothing he normally did as a traveling slave, so he did not look as refined as Nidaja might have liked for going to visit an empress. Alps secretly hoped he would be given something more presentable.

“Alright, Bone, I’m clean. So would you be willing to tell me what the empress wants with me? Despite being taken against my will, I actually tend to be inclined to help people when it’s needed. It would not hurt to tell me what Rios thinks is so important about me that she’d risk open war with the Amani over this.” he said softly. Reika looked to her club, and seemed to pay attention to him. Alps felt so silly doing this, but he decided that ridiculing Reika and saying the club wasn’t really talking would probably send him to Rios a little more injured than cooperating with her madness. Suddenly, Reika seemed tense, anxious, and then desperate, looking with a piercing gaze at Alps.

“Bone, he say’s that wulf is Letai. He says that is why Dominis is wanting wulf. Ees this being true? You is Letai? Dark one hates Letai. War started over Letai. If you ees Letai, ees safer I kill you now! Asuna be in big trouble if you ees one, and we ees not killed you!” Reika shouted. Alps backpedaled a little in the water. Reika knew this already, or Bone would not know it, but it was just now a problem? He realized perhaps that he had grossly underestimated the level of the girl’s madness.

“The Letai were killed off seven hundred years ago!” Alps barked loudly, trying to deflect this blame.

“Yis bone! Ees true, how he can be only one if there is being none before him?!” Reika argued with the club, holding it up to her, its eyes upon her. Alps could not help but think this was the one way he never entertained in his mind that he would die. Would he really be beaten to death by the bone of some large animal at the hand of a completely demented hyena? The wolf watched as Reika began to pace on the rocky shore at the mouth of the cave where Alps was washing himself. “No! No no no, that is stupid idea, ees not possible! Ees not

working like that, when you ees going in, you ees never getting out, that is why. Wulfs lie about story. It is only story to make dark one think his beast haves no teeth now!" Reika argued.

"What is Bone saying? Maybe I can explain and put the notion to rest. I can't be Letai. The Letai are all gone." The lupine stated. He bit his lip a little, knowing he was lying. He'd brought a few back after all. It was no longer true. And if he had the chance and a crystal, he might well bring back more. If they knew, if the Asuna knew, he'd likely be asked to do this for their own fallen warriors if they had been sent in. It was what Nidaja had thought would be their interest in him. He could at least find out if that's the case.

"Bone say's you was in crystal, and got out. He say's Asuna helper merchant wulf saw it happen, then say you alive again after. This ees proof!" Reika gripped the club. "I kill!"

"No, wait! The Letai could not get out, so why did I?! I got out but the Letai didn't, so I can't be Letai!" the wolf barked.

"You got out?! This ees true?!" Reika fairly screamed. "It ees not possible, but you smell of truth! You smell of not lying, and merchant say'd it too with no lying! But Rios is saying you ees Letai to bone. Bone hear it! He hear all the talk brother is having with Rios! She wanting Letai, have to be only Letai!" Reika said, getting into the water, coming after Alps. He gritted his teeth.

"I got out, so I can't be Letai. Don't you see, no Letai ever got out before I escaped! That doesn't mean I'm one of them. There might just have been something wrong with that crystal!" Alps barked.

"Crystal ees not place, crystal is only lock for door!" Reika shouted. "Door with broken lock doesn't mean someone ees getting out! Even shattering crystal and turning to sand doesn't make horrible place go away, it just mean door ees still locked but Mannus not able to draw energy from trapped Letai inside."

"Draw... energy from them?" Alps asked.

"You know nothing of place you were? Crystal ees like ... string attached to person inside, or people, some even more powerful. Energy from Letai used to make powerful spells possible. Mannus controls Uruk with power from Letai. Bone, he can't be Letai if he not even knowing this!" the girl argued.

"Right! I don't know much about them. Only stories. I grew up in Luca. My earliest memories are just from an orphanage in Jalana." Alps stated. Reika paid attention to the club, eyes narrowed upon it. She nodded, and then spoke again.

"Bone ees saying you ees Letai, but he won't let me kill you. I strangle you if I must. But you answer this then. What ees mother look like?"

"My mother?" the slave asked.

"Yis. Your mother. What is looking like? Remember?"

"I don't. I don't remember before the orphanage." the white lupine rumbled.

"Then if you ees Letai, you don't know it. You ees not able to lie about it because you ees not knowing. You believe what you are not because you not seeing what you are. You don't believe because.. because.." She looked to the bone club again, and slumped a little. Alps watched whatever exchange was going on between them. "You don't believe because... you ees afraid." Alps gritted his teeth. "Talk wulf. You is afraid to being Letai." she stated, he nose quivering. The Asuna could smell lies, he already realized it.

"I can't be Letai." Alps stated solidly, shaking a bit. He didn't want to play into her assumption that he was.

"Say it, or I *kill*!" Reika shouted furiously.

"Rios wants me alive!" Alps shouted back. Reika lurched forward, and grabbed him by the neck. She had unbelievable strength as she pulled him down and forced his head under the water. Alps struggled, but could not get free. He was then lurched back up just as he was starting to feel dizzy. The wolf gasped for air.

"Rios ees not knowing you ees with Reika! Accidents is happening! You say! You say you ees scared of being Letai, that ees only reason you say you not!" the hyena screamed, shaking Alps. Alps gritted his teeth. If she was going to kill him anyway, he was not going to go down without a fight. He brought up his elbow, right into Reika's temple. She jerked back, letting him go. Alps grabbed the club from her hand. He backed up, clutching it in both hands ahead of him.

"You want me to say it?!" he barked, shaking with fear and anger. "Alright, I will say it! I'm scared! I'm afraid of being Letai! I know things I should not know, and am drawn to them in ways I should not be. My life has been, in the past year, a constant storm of realization that there was something different about me that I could not place, and when I was in the crystal, I felt things that were familiar and had abilities in there that I felt were from long ago, just being remembered. I felt like I had grown up in that horrible place!" Alps screamed. Reika rubbed the side of her head, looking at him hatefully. He had her weapon. She was not advancing just yet. "You want to know?! Alright fine! I don't know if



I'm Letai, but I do know this... I somehow knew how to move in there. I knew things about it I could not have. I knew because... I think I had been there before. I think everyone else knows it. Misty had Nidaja go into my memories to find out things I forgot about my childhood. I know they went in there to answer the same question you are asking me. So I'm afraid! I am not afraid that it will be nothing, and they will feel let down and I won't be special. I'm afraid they will find out it's true, and deep down inside, I'm having more and more trouble believing it's not! When I was a child, I was thrown into that place. Why would I have been put into a Shadowfall, Reika?! I'd have been put in there because I was Letai. Maybe I was put in there 700 years ago, and don't remember, because I don't remember anything before the orphanage. I have dreams of that place. I have visions of things I can't know and links to people I've never met. So that's why I'm scared! I don't want that kind of thing thrust upon me! I just want to be with my friends and have an uncomplicated life for a change, but now I have to be kidnapped because of what I might be, and that's the reality of being Letai. I'm a target, and Nita may not even be able to keep me safe. Ultimately, Mannus will find out, if the Asuna already suspect. I will bring hardship upon everyone I know!" he said, unable to stop himself from crying. "Is it so wrong for me to deny it?! Is it so unacceptable for me to be afraid?!" the wolf sobbed. Reika moved forward, taking the club from Alps' shaky hands. He didn't care now. He would let her beat him if she wanted. He felt like he was falling and there was no bottom. He could not go back to his friends if he was Letai. It would be too dangerous for them. Reika spoke in her native tongue for a bit with the club. Alps cried. He couldn't stop. All he thought about was how wonderful his life had been for that short time and it was stripped away from him for nothing. Just because of what everyone thought he was, even with no proof.

"Bone ees say'd you ees selfish. You ees powerful and do nothing because you scared of losing things you has, when others has nothing." Reika stated calmly.

"Fuck you, Bone!" Alps shouted, bristling. "Your life is simple, you just hit things and get fawned over by a pretty girl! Don't you fucking judge me – oh fuck, I'm arguing with the bone!" Alps wailed despairingly.

"You ees right Bone. Truth is making people go to pieces sometimes. Wulf ees crazy." the hyena said sadly.

"Are you going to kill me and save your people from the calamity I am going to bring or not?" Alps asked, looking into the water as it lapped around his legs.

"No. Bone say's I can't." she said softly.

"I hate Bone. Bone's a dick." Alps said flatly. "Now will he let you kill me?" There was a pause, and then a reply from the hyena.

“Bone say’s you ees sad, and don’t mean it.”

“What do I do then? Am I going with you to release people from crystals? Is that what Rios wants?” he asked. “I will do whatever Dominis asks. It’s better I am far from Amani.”

“Bone ees saying you would understand this when you ees made to realize what you are. Bone ees wise.” Reika said, nodding. “Sorry ees making you so sad though. It ees for the better though, no?”

“Better for them. Not better for you.” the lupine male said softly.

“Rios ees wiser than Bone. She ees knowing why she does this. Bone ees not even knowing. Mannus kill us all if he knew. That ees why I want you to die. Bone says you will save us. Will you?” the girl asked quizzically. Being told that she wanted to kill him seemed so out of place for how otherwise nice she sounded.

“If I could save everyone from the darkness He brings, I would do it, Reika. But bone should understand, I’m just a slave. Even if I have a weird ability concerning the crystals, it doesn’t stop the fact that Mannus wiped out a Letai army centuries ago and he’s only gotten more powerful since then. One Letai male with no essence-using ability is not going to change much.

“Rios ees wise. She knows something you don’t, I am betting.” came Reika’s soft voice. Alps got out of the water and looked at the girl.

“Are you scared too?” Alps asked.

“Yes.” Reika replied. “Reika ees being afraid we all die because Rios ees wrong, but has to believe in Rios. In the end, we all ees dying, one way or another. We should do something grand with life if we can, even if it ees maybe not right, so long as we ees thinking it ees. Essence never remembers those what was uncertain about their life. Bone is telling me this.” Reika said softly.

“Bone is wise.” Alps conceded. “Let’s go, Reika.” he stated, nodding.

“Alps...” the girl said softly. It was the first time the wolf heard her use his name.

“Yes?” he asked cautiously.

“I ees liking how you smell. This big compliment from Asuna. You thank me.” she said.

“Thank you Reika.” Alps said softly, and began to follow her on another long journey.

## Sirius, Book III

### The Essence

*Comments or Questions?*

Contact Alps: [sarsis@gmail.com](mailto:sarsis@gmail.com)

Or just drop a note at: <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/sarsis/>

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## Chapter 7

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Alps looked up at the blue sky, patterned with occasional clouds drifting aimlessly above him, not even all seeming to go the same direction. That was not uncommon for the oceanfront places like Jalana, where he had arrived late the previous night. The patchy fog-remnant clouds that were lifting were being pushed out to sea by the land breeze, as the higher cumuliform clouds above wandered inland along their usual course from the west. It was enchanting for him to watch, and he remembered, for a bit, that he cloud-watched a lot back when he was a slave. Those days were permanently behind him now. Even though he did not know that Chana herself had met her end at the hands of the mysterious fox, he knew that he'd never see his cruel former mistress again. It was a good feeling.

As he reflected, Nidaja arrived, taking a seat by him at a small round table on the patio of a somewhat expensive café where they had both enjoyed their breakfast. The general smiled at Alps, wearing her typical black leather armor, silver trim making her look as wealthy as she surely was. Alps had ceased to really think of the actual wealth of the royal house, however. It was just how their lives were, and it was natural for them to have a little luxury. They didn't go out of their way to act lavish unless it was to offer a show of dignity or strength to the public, which seemed important enough. Nidaja was also wearing a dark green cloak which pushed back the cold from the breeze sweeping out to the ocean. The slave, however, was a bit better dressed than he had been on most of his journey. He wore his more regal formal garb of a royal house member. Nidaja had insisted that he have it on now when meeting in public with those in the high council or the royal house.

The outfit itself was a black uniform. The slacks were long and neat and pressed, the top was a light, but thick fabric made from dyed, tightly loomed slink fur, so it was warm and fairly water proof. The collar of it rose to the top of Alps' neck in the back, but a 'v' formed at the front left his throat bare and gave him mobility while looking neat and official. A small gold disk clasp held the neck of the garment closed at the bottom of the collar, and then five or so neat frog buttons of gold wire held the front closed over his chest and tummy. The bottom of the "jacket" was a bit longer than a shirt, covering his hips, and making him look a little more casual at times than a suit coat would have. Well shined shoes

adorned his feet, the first time he'd ever worn anything that tight and confining on his feet.

He was not terribly comfortable in the clothing, but knew it was important to Nidaja, and the way she looked at him when she saw him in the outfit for the first time made it equally worth it. Alps found himself lacking the extreme self-consciousness he always had about his fur because somehow, it looked very good with the black outfit. He was clean, healthy, well groomed, and well loved. His being out here at a table at an expensive café with the general of the Amanian armies felt somehow normal to him now. The year that had passed since he left Chana had torn by so quickly that he had trouble remembering exactly when he had changed, but he was not the same person he was back then, of that the slave was sure.

"The others are returning to Diera today," the general said casually. "We are going to get the next ship, as I would like to have more provisions before we go, due to the higher risk involved traveling with a general. The others are safe as they are, but I need to be more guarded. I needed to ask you about something curious I found in my possession, though." The general said, reaching into a leather pouch on her side, and producing the odd, mirror polished green metal sphere. Alps gritted his teeth. He had not even thought about the item he'd taken from the temple maiden who, in Nidaja's body, he'd been intimate with. He looked at it on the table, and then remembered something the unusual fox had said.

"Ressaia. It's some kind of Letai weapon." The wolf stated. Nidaja widened her eyes and perked her tall, triangular ears.

"What? Did the temple maiden find out in her research of it? Why would you have even taken this, Alps?" the lady lupine asked seeming a bit exasperated.

"No... It wasn't her. The fox I released from the Shadowfall was the one who recognized it. Or thought she did. Anyway, something about her makes me inclined to believe what she said. I don't know why I wanted to take it. I'm sorry Nidaja. I should have asked first." The slave said, hanging his head. "I had forgotten about it with everything that happened. The fox seemed glad I took it though." He stated.

"That ... fox is a bit weird, Alps. I'm not sure why she'd have said anything about it, but if you want it, you can have it. I don't know what it's for, and it's not particularly useful to me as it is." The general said, crossing her leg and rolling the sphere across the table to Alps. The young slave picked it up. It felt so cold in his hand. He churred softly,

“Thank you Nidaja. I will guard it, I know it’s valuable just for being a relic, but I do feel drawn to it.” He remarked, before tucking it in his own hip pouch, the orb not overly large, only the size of a large plum. “I suppose then, if we don’t leave until tomorrow, we have some time to take in some of the sites here in Jalana?” the wolf asked. The general smiled brightly at him and nodded.

“I think that’s a delightful idea. I would enjoy getting to accompany you about town and getting to show you some of my favorite spots. Dinner will be a nice change of pace from the rations I’ve been munching on these past few days.”

“I tried my best to act like you during all of this.” Alps stated. “It was not easy. I have a newfound respect for your duties and even the personality you have to display to others.” Nidaja smiled at that, the wolf paying her a compliment. He continued, “I think maybe I picked up some traits that would not have been very welcome in my previous life as a slave.” He hung his head a little as he related that fact. Posing as Nidaja taught him will and free-thinking that Chana would have gutted him for a couple years before. Alps had found in that short time that he liked it, and before he switched back with Nidaja, he had started to become accustomed to it, and feared an action might slip that would feel more like a general than a slave.

“Alps, I am glad you learned some of that. Even if you made the decision a while back that you wished to remain a slave, Nita intends to marry you. Your life won’t change much with her, but you will need to change a little in public. The clothes you wear are only a part of that. It won’t always be easy, but I am given the impression by your former mistress, the memories I saw and how she was when I met her, you were not really used to having it easy.” The wolf nodded, smiling.

“I am glad that the habits I picked up running around as you won’t cause too much stress for everyone.” The slave chuckled. “But I was curious... if I am married to the queen, then I’m not going to be a slave anymore. What would I be? What will people call me?” he asked curiously.

“Alps...” Nidaja murmured casually, “When you marry into royalty, you are immediately knighted. That was a rule made long ago, since only knights originally could marry into royalty, but our lovers have not always been found exclusively in the royal house. Noble birth and noble marriage are the only ways to become a knight. You really don’t have much knowledge of the political structure, do you? I thought Misty was teaching you.” The white lupine male blushed a bit at that and rumbled,

“I admit that I have missed a lot of lessons with Misty in between running off for a war against Uruk, being Shadowfallen and saving priestesses, and chasing after you.” He remarked. “It’s a wonder that I even know what the

regional matriarchs do at this point.” He laughed. Nidaja blushed at that, in realization that she had been part of the deflection of his education. She chuckled at him and nodded, saying softly,

“Okay, you have me there, I suppose you have not had as structured a life as you might have otherwise wanted, but it’s been fun right? You’ve not been unhappy with your new life?” she asked, sipping her tea from a straw.

“Oh goodness no, I’ve been loving every day of it. I’ve heard people talk about standing in line to buy a book with stories about exactly the sort of life I lead. I certainly have no complaint.” He laughed.

“You like our crazy “adventures” then?” the general asked, resting her cheek on her hand, stirring the sugar in her tea a little more.

“Without a doubt.” Alps barked with finality, to make sure his lover knew that their faster-paced lifestyle wasn’t getting him down.

“Oh that’s good!” came a familiar but unexpected voice from nearby. Alps and Nidaja both jerked their heads up, looking for the voice. A familiar face appeared from behind a column. Neit, the thief who Alps had not seen since she slugged him in the rooftop garden in Diera, was standing there, dressed in simple grey and black robes. Her hair had been cropped short to her head, so she looked as if she belonged in a monastery, not a café.

“What are you doing here?” Nidaja grumbled acridly. Alps said nothing. He didn’t know how to feel about the girl after she had betrayed him. He was not naturally inclined to grudges and ill feelings, but that had been proof to him that his affection for others could be used as a weapon against Nita herself, and it was both sobering and hurtful to him. Nidaja, however, had softened a little in her view of the thief, as much as she had little respect for her because she had twice now helped her when it came to Alps. Once when he was sick, finding the lapine shaman, Xanthas, and again in telling her where Alps had gone when he ran off with the Spirits off Silverlight.

“I’m not going to lie, I traded the information about Alps’ whereabouts in order to get free passage over to Jalana, but I came here broke, and with a price still on my head, lady Nidaja. I haven’t vanished from the underbelly of society just yet, even if it is my ultimate goal. I have to eat until I can earn a more noble living after all.” She stated.

“So you’ve gone back to being a pickpocket and thieving?” Alps asked, getting the gist. “You realize that by telling Nita and Nidaja where I was you risked their lives. They could have died going after me.”

“They’d have found some other way to track you, and if you had died because the Silverlight folks had dragged you off into danger, it might have started civil unrest. I knew the chance I was taking. But I wasn’t doing it for free.” the tan-furred female said wryly.

“You still haven’t answered me, girl.” Nidaja growled. “It’s all well and good to know you aren’t dead, it will delight Uri, I can assure you. But that doesn’t tell me why you are standing around in a fine café where you could not afford to eat if you blew weeks worth of filched savings here.” She demanded. “Why are you disturbing our tea time?”

“I have an opportunity to help the royal house, and redeem myself a little more.” Neit said, her face becoming serious. “I have to admit, I would normally have never thought of this avenue, but I have information to sell, and it pertains to Queen Razelle and it pertains to her slave.” she stated flatly, her arms crossed, making her seem a bit darker, since she was not getting a terribly warm reception.

“We aren’t buying information from you. You’ve already proved a stunning capacity for lying, Neit.” Alps barked.

“How much?” Nidaja said after a brief pause.

“What? Nidaja, you can’t be serious, she’s crooked.” Alps pleaded, gesturing at her.

“Crooked she may be, but her words have been true to me twice now, when it really mattered. How much girl? I won’t dance around the subject.” Neit nodded curtly to Nidaja, seeming more businesslike now that the formalities of greeting had been devastated by her reputation. Alps felt a little withdrawn suddenly. He had just made himself out to be rather hateful, and that wasn’t his nature at all. Still, he felt sure he’d given the message that he wasn’t to be stepped on in the future.

“I want to be off the wanted sheet, and I want to be assured a job. I can’t start a new life and make a decent living without that.” She stated.

“Your head should currently be buried in a separate location from your body. I think you’re doing remarkably well for someone who has committed the crimes you have and been in my grasp twice now.” Nidaja said. “I will give you 200 bits for your information.

“No deal, you will just have to find out the hard way.” Neit said, turning away.



“Find what out the hard way?” Alps asked, standing, feeling a sense of dread. The attack on Nita that had him locked in a Shadowfall crystal had been a good example of what could happen if no one knew what was coming. To intentionally dismiss information seemed a terrible error. Alps didn’t get a reply, he simply heard a squeak from Neit, who Nidaja had moved in a flash of spell-bound speed to grab by the back of her neck. “Shit.” The slave barked, a little alarmed by the sudden shift from coaxing, to violence. This was a side of Nidaja the wolf didn’t think he could ever duplicate.

“You could have gotten 200 bits. Now, we are gonna see how an execution robe looks on you.” The general growled. Alps’ stomach sank. The thought that Neit was about to actually die did not set well with him. Even if he didn’t like her much for what she’d done, he still knew her intimately.

“Neit, just tell her what’s going on, I don’t want you getting killed over this.” Alps said sternly. Nidaja seemed a little surprised that Alps defended her.

“Two hundred bits won’t change my future. I’m gonna end up always skulking about in the trash, with the trash, making more trash, and being trash. I’ve had it!” Neit barked. “You don’t know what it’s like! You were born with a good life. You’ve been royalty from the beginning! You know how I started?” she asked. Nidaja kept a tight hold on the girl’s neck. Alps originally thought it was just to keep her from running, but the general reached under Neit’s arm, and withdrew a long, slender knife that had been hidden there. Had the girl gone for a weapon, it was obvious that Nidaja would have simply and instantly killed her with a magic-imbued jerk of an already muscular arm.

“I imagine you are about to tell us.” A small crowd had started to gather along the street. The group was high enough up off the street on the patio that no one could hear the conversation, and there were not any other patrons seated near enough that they would risk getting closer and facing Nidaja themselves.

“I was an orphan. The little boys get sold as slaves, and the little girls stay in the orphanage until they are old enough to take care of themselves, and then they are ejected out onto the street.” Neit explained. “I didn’t get to have it easy like Alps did, where I just do housework and someone takes care of my needs. I had to find other ways to get food in my belly.” Nidaja shook her head.

“Alps didn’t have it easy.” Nidaja growled, tossing the knife aside. “And you’ve got no right to bring him up; he doesn’t have anything to do with what happened to you then.”

“He didn’t then, but he does now!” Neit barked again, seeming infuriated. Nidaja shook her to make her quiet down. Alps gritted his teeth, a little confused. What did anything about Neit have to do with him now?

“What the hell’s that supposed to mean?” Nidaja cast Neit against the column by the gate to the café. “What’s your unyielding obsession with being involved with him, you hurt him! You betrayed him!” Nidaja barked.

“I know!” Neit cried, tears welling in her eyes. “And that’s when I knew what I had become was wrong, and at first, I was just scared and alone, and running.” She barked. “As soon as I hit him, I knew I had hit bottom, and I thought a lot. I stood on many a bridge, thinking about where I was going.” Alps rolled his eyes inwardly. They were drawing an audible crowd now. Many could hear the things she was saying. Nidaja fidgeted, not wanting the negative impacts of this public interaction.

“So find another way, but I don’t see what Alps has to do with any of it.” She barked.

“He was the same!” Neit shouted back, her face heated, red tingeing in her ears as tan fur bristled. “He was a slave. An orphan. A nobody, and on his own he’d have had to make the same decisions as me, but look!” she pointed flamboyantly at Alps. “What is he now? He’s not a slave, not dressed like that. He’s not a pet. I already know he publicly announced his love for the queen, and even many of the people are rallied behind the commoner who united the Spirits of Silverlight and the royal house. What is he?”

“In a few months, he’ll be a knight.” Nidaja said. There was intense murmuring among the crowd. There were only a few possibilities that it could mean, and it would be nationwide rumor-fodder by nightfall. Nidaja didn’t care. It had not been made secret anyway. Things had just been too chaotic of late to be very official about it.

“Oh.” Neit said. “That... is very much my point though.” She added. “It wasn’t about what he was born into. It was about choices. He was at the same starting line as I was, and he found a happy life while I lost my way. And I screwed up my life so bad thieving and lying that I only had one avenue left, and that was the gallows. And even after trying to change and redeem myself, and pretending to be someone new, it’s still all that I have ahead of me. So kill me if you won’t help me, but I’ll die before I help you again.” She looked sternly at Nidaja.

“Very well.” The general said, dark energy crackling along her arm. Neit’s eyes widened, then snapped shut as she gritted her teeth and prepared for the end.

“Don’t.” Alps said solidly.

“What?” Nidaja said.

"I said don't hurt her. Take her off the wanted list." He stated.

"Alps, I don't mind you acting a little stronger, but this is the course of law. You can't make the choice here. We can't have any criminal taking hostages to get their name off the list. Do you think you are anything else to her?" The general said. Alps gritted his teeth. He was a hostage? And Nita was too, since she had mentioned both. It was true though, if he thought about it that way. She had indicated something bad could happen if Nidaja didn't do what she wanted. Still, he couldn't watch Neit die. He especially thought this if she was finally telling the truth about wanting to change, and take a new direction. The slave really felt that she deserved a second chance.

"Hostages? You think I'm taking hostages?" Neit said with her eyes wide. Then she lowered her head, apparently suddenly feeling that it did very much look like she was. After a moment, she spoke up. "You are right. Of course you are right. I'm still making the same selfish choices. What would you have done, Alps?" Neit asked, looking to the white wolf. He gritted his teeth again. Her eyes seemed so sorrowful. He felt immediately that she was being genuine. She was confused, desperate, young and afraid, and just didn't know what to do. The slave's features melted a bit.

"I'd help my friends." He said softly.

"I have none." She stated flatly.

"You could have." He answered.

"I messed it up. I can't go back." The thief stated bitterly.

"We don't decide who your friends are, you do." The wolf rumbled. Nidaja watched the exchange quietly, as did about twenty other people in earshot.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Neit huffed.

"When is knowing you could help someone... and choosing not to... ever going to be the right choice, even if there was something you wanted? I would have helped my friends even if it meant I would lose my life. Would you do the same in the face of your own mortality?" the white lupine explained. Neit hung her head. She was ashamed.

"Will you tell us your secret, Neit?" Nidaja insisted. Alps flattened his ears, wishing it didn't have to be driven to threatening to get this out of her.

"Yes." Neit admitted finally.

“Even if I don’t take you off the wanted list?” Nidaja rumbled. “And even if, now, you have forfeited your 200 bits?” Neit nodded again.

“Nidaja, she needs to eat.” Alps stated.

“Come on girl.” The general said, tugging Neit along. “Regardless of what the secret is, I will not let you jeopardize what little chance you did have by the wrong people thinking you ratted them out.” The general whispered. “This will have to be somewhere more private.” Alps got up again and padded quickly after the Nidaja and Neit, whose arm was being wrenched a little by the older general. She protested a bit, but not enough to get shaken again.

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The three of them wound down alleys and streets, main roads and thoroughfares and even right through a couple shops, Neit staying quiet for the most part, before Nidaja burst right into a small cottage where a lean, old grey lupine was casually painting a lovely sunset image of the bay from memory. The grizzled old thing looked up at Nidaja with shocking disinterest, and Nidaja paid him little more mind than he did. Apparently, Nidaja came bursting in there with protesting girls a lot. The general cast Neit onto the couch and barked,

“Out with it.” her words stern and final.

“As I was saying before, I resumed my life of crime when I got here.” Neit began.

“Is this relevant?” Nidaja cut in.

“Very.” the thief replied.

“Continue.” the general insisted.

“I got into some places that most people don’t, and I see things that go on that even the town guard won’t acknowledge.” The girl continued. “I saw something I didn’t believe at first, so I ventured closer, in the shadows, to make sure. There’s a pair of Asuna, a male and female, in the city.”

“That’s... Not good.” Nidaja growled.

“What’s an Asuna?” the slave asked.

"You are better off not knowing." Nidaja and Neit both said in unison. Alps tilted his head, puzzled. How could it be so bad that he'd not even get to hear about them? Why would Neit and Nidaja know just fine and he didn't? The wolf really wished he could read the news board in the town center, or had more time for books, since no one taught him about the big things. Reading was still new and difficult for him, even with Misty's tutelage.

"And you are sure that's what they were?" Nidaja asked.

"Positive. Most of the thieves and lowlifes in the city know better than to deal with them even if they get in this far." She stated.

"What were they here for? What are they after?" Nidaja asked.

"They want Alps." The thief said.

"Why?" Nidaja asked frankly. The old guy continued to paint.

"They said he's got an ability that they want. I don't even know what they were talking about. He's a slave. He's kind and I wish I hadn't hurt him, and he can change people's lives if they get too close... but aside from that, he's not anything that unusual." Neit explained. Alps blushed hotly at that thought. He had changed a lot of lives that he'd touched, and he knew likely a great many he had not directly touched.

"Did you hear them mention anything else? Even if it was something you didn't understand, we need to know what was said." Nidaja said, suddenly seeming very serious. Alps recoiled a little. For Nidaja to seem so severe over it, it must have been a real threat.

"They didn't speak common very well, but they mentioned that no one comes back, and that they needed Letai blood. It was pretty cryptic at times; I don't know what else I could repeat without speculation." The younger girl stated. Nidaja paced a bit.

"They think Alps is Letai then." The general stated. "They think this because he some how got out of the Shadowfall crystal. Maybe they have former leaders they want to free and want to use Alps to do so." Nidaja growled, pacing.

"But I'm not Letai, they were wiped out hundreds of years ago." The wolf answered.

"Alps, I would not be so sure. We don't know enough about you to be sure." Nidaja said.

“What? No, that’s silly Nidaja, I’m just a slave. It’s nothing so odd.” Alps complained.

“Not at all odd that you have white fur, and Luna has white fur and that you have abilities to travel around in the Shadowfall crystals, breaking out priestesses?” Nidaja asked sharply.

“Wait, what?” Neit asked.

“You repeat none of this if you care to see the sun come up again.” The general barked. While Alps’ emergence from the crystal had not really been kept a strict secret, the fact that he brought anyone back was practically forbidden knowledge.

“There are Letai priestesses that have been released?” Neit repeated. Nidaja nodded.

“Alps was shadowfallen by a spy who had intended to assassinate Nita, I am surprised you hadn’t heard about it.” Nidaja explained.

“I heard about the assassination attempt, that was mostly why I was so desperate to skip town. The mood of the underside of Diera went real sour, people ratting everyone out and getting rid of their enemies by claiming they had something to do with it. You know it was going on.” Neit said harshly.

“I know. I saw more heads fall in that two weeks than I have in years run together.” Nidaja admitted. “No one died that wasn’t a criminal, you know that.” She stated.

“Still, I didn’t want to chance that someone would say it about me, so when I heard Alps was running off to Luca, I made that deal with you and Uri and Misha to get safe passage in return for telling you where Alps was going. Alps nodded to that as Nidaja looked blankly. Neit didn’t know Alps was in Nidaja’s body at that time. He had been the one to trade for that information.

“Okay, still, Alps wasn’t shadowfallen, he couldn’t have been. No one comes back from that. It’s beyond even death.” The girl stated.

“I’m not a liar, Neit.” Nidaja stated. “If I dare tell it to you, you can be sure it’s the truth. He was in the Shadowfall as true as he’s standing here now. And if the Asuna caught wind of that, it’s likely they feel he can go in someone else’s Shadowfall crystal and save one of their own.

“Who’s saying I can’t?” Alps asked. Nidaja looked at the slave with a pained expression.

“That’s the problem. You might actually be able to go into a crystal if someone else cast the spell on you, but how do we know you can come back again? Maybe there was something wrong with that crystal? Maybe that fox broke it? She wasn’t Letai. There might be something else entirely at work there. Your luck is a blessing to me, love, but I won’t risk you to help ... those.” She waved dismissively.

“So what do we do?” Neit asked. “They were offering 40,000 bits for someone to capture him. People know he’s here now, and people would be willing to kill a general for that kind of money to get at him.”

“This is where the solution is easier than the problem. If there isn’t a person left living to offer them a reward for Alps, no one’s gonna want to cross the queen to nick him.” The general said. Alps gritted his teeth yet again. There had been an unfortunate amount of talk about killing this morning.

“So ... I can go then? I have told you all I know.” The thief said sadly.

“Oh no, not a chance.” Nidaja barked, snagging Neit’s tail. She whimpered.

“We had a deal.” The younger female whined plaintively.

“The deal has changed. I could not have dreamed it would have been a problem this serious. If they are offering a reward that high, then the Asuna tribal council itself has to be involved. The council controls the money, and no mere merchant or collector has that kind of gold to back them up.” The general stated. “I am changing our deal to match the value of your information.

“Please...” Neit whimpered.

“Nidaja, be fair.” Alps rumbled. The older guy had stopped painting, though he wasn’t looking. There was no denying that this was interesting, even to the painter who Nidaja apparently didn’t mind crashing in on.

“I am being fair, and it’s fortunate for you. I will take you off the wanted list, as you requested, and I will give you work to do.” The general growled. “But until I am finished with this investigation, Neit, you work for me.” The girl wavered a bit in shock. Alps had full sympathy for her.

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The shutters were drawn closed and locked on the second floor of the inn. A message had been sent on a fast schooner to inform Nita of the development, and that her life-mate to be would be just a little delayed in getting back. Until the Asuna responsible for putting the price on Alps were dealt with, it was too risky to move him around without Nidaja having full control of the situation. She had even enlisted the help of the town guard, who was more than joyful to help protect the slave, since he'd been responsible for helping to bury the Uruk threatening the city under an avalanche. Again, the young lupine male was feeling the burden of unwanted popularity, and stayed more or less out of the way. Nidaja and Neit had a meeting without his assistance, leaving Alps to eat in the company of six guards, which was an uncomfortable experience, and the two had apparently come up with a plan to flush out the individuals paying the money for Alps. There was a lot of risk, however, since Neit would have only a closely following Nidaja to help her in the immediate area. Only a few of the higher members of the town guard had been told. The other risk was that Alps himself would be used as bait, to make it genuine that he had been captured by Neit.

Alps found himself sitting on the edge of a bed as Neit and Nidaja discussed back up options with the plan. Originally Neit had objected to playing any part in this little risky venture, but the offer of a thousand bits for a completed mission had given Neit some deeper interest in playing the part. Nidaja was still adorned in her customary dark leather armor, and Neit had changed to something light and casual. It was nothing more than a ragged-looking skirt and a tattered, stained white blouse. Alps recognized it as the shirt she'd been wearing the first night he met her. It occurred to him that she probably didn't have much in the lines of property now.

"So... you think you can beat two Asuna in a fight?" Neit asked, kicking her legs a bit as she sat by Nidaja on the desk in the large room Alps had been staying with them in.

"With them not suspecting I'm with you, most certainly. They are savage, but they aren't immortal." Nidaja laughed softly. Alps coughed a bit and cleared his throat. Neit and the general looked over at him. The white lupine rumbled softly,

"Okay, I think I should be allowed to know who the Asuna are." He was beginning to feel offended that they were leaving him out of this. It affected him obviously, he felt he had some right, slave or not. He was their friend, wasn't he? Nidaja slicked her ears back, nodding.

"I'm sorry Alpsie." she rumbled, the white wolf a little surprised to actually hear her apologize, and feeling a little guilty about being defensive. She moved over to the bed, sitting down in front of him, "It's not just who, Alps, it's what." She added, clasping her hands over her lap. "Not a lot of people talk about the Asuna since they have lived outside of our territory for a very long time, and seldom



venture into it, but when they do, I promise you, trouble follows. They are barbaric, cruel, and heartless. They are a ruthless people who, to save themselves, sold themselves to Mannus, and ended up getting pushed into slavery to farm the crystals needed to make the Uruk, as well as the clay and other things that were required. The Uruk army would never have grown to what it is now if it were not for the loathsome, cowardly Asuna.” Nidaja explained.

“They are not welcome in our lands, for the most part, though thieves will deal with them, because they can still bring gold, so if you see Asuna, you know there’s dirty dealing going on.” Neit added. Alps looked between them curiously.

“What does an Asuna look like? Are they lupine like us? Would I know one if I saw one?” he asked. Nidaja nodded to him briskly.

“Oh yes... You would definitely know an Asuna if you saw one. They have kind of a lupine look, but they have very thick, white manes of hair, male or female, and they have spots all over them, and dark hands and feet, and dark faces. They have shorter, rounder ears than we do, like little bowls on their heads, it’s very striking.” Nidaja described, as Neit sat by Alps on the bed. The wolf wagged his tail softly. He was happy to see Nidaja not beating Neit up, though he was still not entirely comfortable around the thief. She had been the only one to intentionally hurt Alps since he’d come to belong to Nita.

“Barbaric and violent they may be,” Neit said, “But they aren’t stupid. They are clever, and they are not easy to track or fight with. We would prefer to not have to fight one on one. The idea is to draw the pair of them out, and have them arrested alive. If they will allow it.” Neit said ominously.

“They aren’t known for making good prisoners, but we have to find out exactly why they want to steal you. If they are still around to offer money, you are in danger.” The general stated.

“How long ago have we been out of diplomatic contact with the Asuna?” Alps asked curiously, finding it odd that they would remain so terribly at odds as to be relegated to a criminal element only. Even to the extent that none lived in lupine settlements at all.

“We’ve never been friends, Alps. They seem to take our attempt to build nice cities and the like as an insult to their own tribal heritage. They have burned Jalana down three times, long, long ago. That was even before they were in league with Mannus.” She stated. The slave gritted his teeth at that. It was obvious that the Asuna would be a sore subject around Nita too, if that were the case. He hoped this was not causing a lot more strife than just having to get him out of trouble. He didn’t want a war over him.

"Then we need to make sure that these two don't come back with me, but what's to stop them from seeking me out again?" he asked.

"In the future, we will ensure that your protection is as paramount as the queen's. We won't have you without someone capable to guard you." Nidaja stated.

"I don't like that." Alps stated. "Is there no permanent resolution?" he asked.

"Sure, If they only want to borrow you, we can hand you over to them, and hope they don't skin you before they give you back." Neit said flatly.

"That bad, huh?" he asked.

"Yeah." Nidaja commented.

"Why do I keep getting into these messes?" Alps asked softly.

"This one's not my fault at least." Neit clarified.

"You should still be punished for what you did." Nidaja added, making the girl shrink back a bit.

"Don't tempt me." Alps stated.

"You have the right. I won't stop you." The general added.

"Don't you dare." The younger female said, balling up a little on the bed. Alps could not help but notice her tail was wagging, however. He looked at her for a moment, and then smirked. There might be a real level of therapy in accepting her punishment. Alps leaned over her on the bed and murmured,

"Do you feel that you deserve no punishment at all for your transgressions?" he asked, his voice half whispering. The tan female looked up at Alps and blushed hotly, her short-cut hair making her look more tomboyish than usual. The tone of his voice made her mind wander a bit off course, obviously.

"I'm ... not saying that. I don't deserve the fortune I have now, to be sure. I feel terrible for what I did." she stated, shivering a little.

"Then he should be the one to get to punish you, yes?" Nidaja insisted, sitting at the edge of the bed. The girl stiffened up.

“What are you going to do?” she asked, looking at Alps and making the white wolf blush again. Alps got up and looked quietly at the girl. He could hardly believe what thoughts were even going through his head. The mere act of considering what flashed through his mind was actually a crime. Would he commit it, even in reprisal, in front of Nidaja?

“I’m not allowed to strike her in return. It’s punishable by death for me.” Alps offered to Nidaja, even knowing that it would perhaps break the guilt that Neit was feeling and make things run a lot smoother. The smaller female shuddered visibly and held her knees. She nodded to Alps.

“I give you Royal License to evoke Modified Law.” The general said. She said it as if she were just offering the slave some wine.

“What do I do with that?” Alps asked.

“Anything short of murder.” The emerald lupine female said flatly. Neit gasped.

“Anything?” the slave asked heavily.

“Provided she lives.” Nidaja announced. The thief backed up on the bed a little, pressing against the railing at the head of the bed, shaking her head.

“This wasn’t part of the deal.” she stated. Alps got up on his knees on the bed, approaching Neit.

“I’ll not hurt you any more than you did me.” The wolf crooned.

“You two can’t be serious.” The smaller girl stated, gritting her teeth. Nidaja nodded to her, and looked to Alps.

“Would you like me to get a rod?” she asked. Neit squeaked and tightened up, trembling.

“No.” Alps said coldly. The thief visibly relaxed. “Give me your belt.” He added. Neit whimpered and put her butt against the wall, arms out along the railing at the head of the bed.

“No please...” she said in a meek voice. Alps leaned in as Nidaja handed him her thick, heavy leather belt. The slave folded it in his hands. He pulled on it a little, making it squeak from the pressure.

“Turn around.” Nidaja stated flatly. Alps nodded. Neit gritted her teeth, and shook her head.

“No way. He’s gonna hit me. He’s a male. Males aren’t allowed – “ she huffed. Alps cut her off.

“It’s alright Nidaja, I’m okay hitting this side.” His voice seeming so flat and cold it was alarming even to him. Alps’ heart raced. This was a very serious thing for him to do, but his own ill feelings about Neit had been troubling for him. He didn’t like feeling disgust the way he did, especially if she was genuinely trying to help. He truly felt that this was the best way to get rid of those dark feelings he so disliked. Being told that he’d strike her front got Neit to turn around, her hands clamping the bar, her head down.

“You don’t have to do this. I told you I was sorry about that.” She cried, her body shaking. Alps pondered just how bad a beating she expected she was about to get. He’d not actually injure her. He had no intention. Still, he didn’t intend to make it a loving caress either. Alps didn’t wait for Neit to come up with anything that would make him second-guess himself. The belt flicked across the light-skirted backside of the anxious thief with a resounding *CRACK!* And Neit barked out in pain. Alps gritted his teeth, not enjoying hurting her, but he could not get around the fact that it was justified, and it would leave her no longer “guilty” in his presence. This would make things run a lot more smoothly, and would help to blot out a very bad memory.

“More than one, Alps, if you are going to do it.” Nidaja said sternly. Alps brought the belt back over his shoulder, and the girl cried out,

“No no no no!” and braced. Nidaja held the end of the belt, preventing the next stroke, holding up a finger, until Neit relaxed, and then she let it go, nodding to the slave. Alps gritted his teeth. *CRACK!* The thief cried out again, pushing her chest to the wall. The slave let her have another one as she relaxed again, as indicated by Nidaja. His ears folded back. Another one, and another, and finally, the girl sank to the bed, sobbing, and Alps slipped the belt under her chest, and pulled the thief up to his own chest, holding himself behind her close, the girl shaking in his arms. He whispered into her ears softly as she cried,

“Now you owe me no further apology, and you bear no more guilt on my account.” He said in a soothing tone, Neit relaxing a bit as she found the punishment was over. Alps held her up against him with the belt over her chest still, under her smallish breasts, the lean, underfed thief girl not a difficult thing to hold. Alps had gotten stronger through good food, and continued hard work any time he could for Nita.

“Thank you.” squeaked Neit softly. Nidaja moved over beside Alps on the bed and churred softly, “I had figured that is where you were going with this.” She noted. “No hard feelings on either side now?” she asked.

“No hard feelings.” Alps stated.

“Liar.” Neit chirped softly, pushing her hips back a little, making Alps gasp as he found himself inexplicably aroused. There was something alarmingly intimate about punishing Neit like that. Doing something so strictly forbidden to someone Alps had long ago shared himself completely with was an act of passion and trust. Nidaja head-tilted a bit and murmured,

“Alps, I’d not have expected that from you, of all people.” Her words were teasing.

“It’s not on purpose. I don’t.” he recoiled a bit, sitting back. Neit turned around, tears still streaking down her face, but her expression was still happy.

“It’s alright Alps. It’s about physical contact. That’s natural.” she stated, obviously trying to keep doubt of his intentions from entering his mind.

“Yea, for animals.” He barked back shamefully, covering his lap a bit. Nidaja pulled Alps’ hands up by his head.

“We’re all animals, Alps.” The general stated slowly. “Most don’t learn that until they are on the battlefield. This isn’t the worst time to figure that out. Don’t worry about it.” The thief drew closer, eyes still wet from her tears, and embraced the white wolf softly, her tan body still lightly trembling from the beating she’d just gotten. It was nothing compared to what Nidaja had given her, but it meant so much more than anything the general could have done, so it was having a lasting effect. Alps murmured softly,

“I don’t think it’s sane to get any kind of...” he started softly.

“... Pleasure from inflicting pain? Not as strange as you’d think. Especially to those who have known as much as you have. You don’t enjoy the pain you gave to Neit...” the general stated.

“... you were aroused by the pain you took away from me.” The thief practically purred.

“That’s natural.” Nidaja said softly, and then whispered into Alps’ ear, “... for a Letai.” The slave blushed hotly again, his body tensing as Neit’s hands drifted up and down his chest, bare between the hanging vest on his shoulders.

“Cut it out, you know I’m not...” his words came, tail flitting nervously. He was very aware of Luna’s power, and to be called anything close was embarrassing. Neit leaned forward, chin over his shoulder as her fingers sought out his soft fur along his chest and tummy.

He found no disgust with her now. Had the punishment really reset their friendship like that? It had been his intent, but he didn't realize how much good it would do. The white male found himself only more aroused now, as those hands drifted along his front, the belt hanging limply in Alps' hand. Neit began to cry again, but it was a little different.

"Missed your only friend?" Nidaja said softly into the thief's ear. She nodded, and kissed at Alps' throat. The slave tensed up. Surely it hadn't repaired things that much! The male tensed up a bit, as Nidaja held his hands up by his head, pulling his back to her front, as Neit slid down his body, lips kissing at his tummy. Alps' eyes grew wide. It was happening too quickly for him to fight, and at the moment, he didn't want to. His thighs tightened up slowly as hands slipped down over the tented front of his trousers, and casually, slowly undid them. His pink, hot masculinity fell from the 'V' of his undone pants, and the cool air only greeted it for a second before replaced by a very warm, deep, passionate mouth.

"Oh dear light's call..." Alps whimpered, his hips tightening as he leaned his shoulders back to Nidaja's chest. She pulled Alps' hands behind his back, the slave suddenly finding himself prisoner to this moment. His already aching erection throbbed as a hand slipped around the base of that pulsing length. It was not Neit's, but Nidaja's, who stroked him in long, soothing, sensual strokes ahead of that slowly rising and falling muzzle. Alps looked down into the closed eyes of his renewed friend, and he began to pant softly. The wolf was unable to believe the turn this had taken, but he was not about to resist it. Crushed under the stones of this single moment, the hurt and hollowness he'd felt for months after Neit's betrayal was unable to reach him. His legs tightened and relaxed as he watched transfixed, his point of view filled by the rising and falling hand ahead of the smallish, but deep mouth of his sudden lover. Her eyes closed tighter as she swallowed loudly, getting the taste of pre, perhaps, finally.

"Good girl, Neit. That's a much better place for your head than on the gallows, yes?" Nidaja teased, making the girl smile around Alps' cock so broadly that he could feel her lips tighten around his shaft. Alps struggled a little, wanting to stroke that lovely, lean, poor face. Now that she'd mentioned it, there was a striking realization of just how difficult his life had been compared to what it was now, and here was the girl in front of him, getting a taste of that life, useful, unbound by a dark future now, enjoying real friends who weren't trying to pinch a coin off of her. Nidaja held his arms though, both his wrists held tightly in her single-handed grip. The wolf huffed as he watched that tan-furred muzzle sink down harder on him, and his hips flexed and relaxed a little harder. He wanted this now. There was no denying it. And likely, there would be no turning back from this point anyway. Not that he wanted to.

Alps heard Nidaja moan softly, and he looked back over his shoulder to see her face lit up with soft pleasure, and he pondered that a moment, before he

realized with how tightly she was held up against his back, his tail was between her thighs, and her sex, under the skirt of that leather armor, was pressed right to the ticking root of his strong, wagging tail. Alps made a point to continue to wag, though it didn't take much thought. He was enjoying this. The white-furred male watched Neit push back and forth over him, and felt his sack drawing tighter as he thought about her just swallowing around him as he climaxed, pulsing deep in that short, cute muzzle of hers. His toes curled at that thought. He began to pull in short, shallow breaths, his hips flexing again and again, which the close-hugging Nidaja could surely feel. She whispered lightly,

"Neit... You are pretty good with him. He'll not be able to hold back much longer at this rate." She promised, perhaps a word of warning to the girl in case she wanted more. The general continued to stroke Alps' twitching cock as Neit's head popped off the tip, looking up at the male wolf longingly, her breath baited with need as she looked back at Nidaja.

"I can't believe we are..." she seemed unable to break the spell by even putting a label on what she was doing.

"Don't stop." Alps panted pitifully. Neit looked up at Nidaja and the general nodded to her.

"You'd not want him stopping with you, would you?" she asked. The girl turned around, holding the railing of the bed ahead of her. Alps was still in a half-kneeling position on the bed in front of Nidaja, his hips back a little from trying to keep his tail where it was, wagging against her sex. It wasn't the first time he felt the wetness of a lover there. Neit looked over her shoulder flirtatiously at Alps as he gritted his teeth, not wanting to move away from Nidaja, but she was holding his hands where they were and he didn't want the pleasure to stop for his first lover.

"Oh you naughty little tease." The general growled playfully, and then there was a swish, a startling sound as the belt that Alps had used to beat Tia moments before flicked out, making the girl jump, thinking perhaps that she would be struck by it again. The girl did not get hit by it though, finding to Alps' surprise that Nidaja had neatly gotten it wrapped around the front of her strong thighs. The general pulled her back by her hips as if that wrapped belt were a harness, and Alps groaned a sinking tone of raw pleasure as soaking wet heat engulfed his throbbing, needing shaft. It was a single, hard, penetrating stroke that took the girl by surprise. Still nearly virginal in tightness, she lowered her head and chest against the railing and quivered as she felt so utterly filled.

The slave found his hands free, but simply reached back over his shoulder to hold the back of Nidaja's neck with one hand, and tucked the other under the general's skirt. While the thief could not seem to come up with the coins to get

underwear under that light cloth skirt, Nidaja had what might have been, at one time, rather nice lacey under-things. Were it not for how the male's claws tore them asunder, splitting them wide open as his fingers pushed deep into her, making her hips roll against his rump, almost flattening his determined hand against his own rump. It was awkward, but it felt so good as Nidaja held the thief girl against his hip with her leather belt-harness. The thief drew forward almost completely off of Alps, trembling with the pleasure of her penetration, and Nidaja jerked her back onto him. The white wolf squeaked loudly as his hips rode up high and hard, almost pushing the girl off her knees and onto her feet, hands gripping the railing.

From that point, things got very base and intense, and Alps got a very good taste of Nidaja's comment equating everyone to animals. There was something outright feral about how aggressive the general pulled Neit back into the male's hips, striking them together as Alps' fingers dug into the emerald lupine female's quivering depths. Because of how Alps intentionally fluttered his fingers against the general, it was Nidaja who popped first, buckling a little, holding the thief tight against Alps a moment. The slave bucked his hips hard for that moment of uncontrolled, untamed contact, making the tan-furred female squeal with delight as she bucked her hips against him, a bit more rough and eager than Alps had felt her. There was no need for her to pretend to be meek now. Especially not now.

Alps kept one hand behind him, pistoning two and then three fingers in and out of the general's sex, his other hand resting on Neit's lower back as the general finally started jerking her hard back and forth with the leather strap, tugging her intentionally over Alps' throbbing flesh. It felt so tight that he could swear her depths were actually clinging to him, suckling him toward his release. The white male whimpered softly,

"Nidaja, I'm not gonna last. I can't hold it..." his back started to tighten up. He could not believe the kind of pleasure this was giving, but he had regained someone he cared about, so the emotional addition to his physical pleasure made his mind reel. His hips lurched back and forth hard as the general let him pump a bit more, and then pulled Neit back hard enough that she cried out, and Alps found himself trapped so tightly between Nidaja's hips, and Neit's, that he could not move at all. He just throbbed painfully inside her soaking wet sex. It was too much for Neit, and she just squalled as her nectar flooded over the slave's fuzzy white pouch, spattering the bed lewdly.

"Gonna spill inside that little thief, lover?" came Nidaja's words, so critical of him. He felt at first she might be telling him no, as if he could force himself held completely still like that in the first place. He tensed as she whispered more into his ear, the convulsing sex of his vindicated friend suckling at his shaft, just missing the mark of being enough to send him over the edge. "We are being so shameful and yet, it feels so good, doesn't it? Her welted butt against your



tummy so tight, your cock buried so fucking deep inside her that you can feel the breech of her womb..." Alps gasped out loudly as Nidaja's words were not longer critical. They were provoking. He struggled, trying to roll his hips. He *did* want to climax, how could she tease like that? He flexed, and groaned softly. He could feel the mouth of her cervix, as deep as Nidaja was holding her against him. The slave huffed in deep, feral panting,

"Yes, love... I'm close... Another few tugs will do it..." his entire body shaking. He wasn't lying. If the girl could just buck a few more times, he was sure he'd blow so hard in her it would back-draft all over his tummy and lap. The wolf trembled as the girl in front of him apparently caught full force what Nidaja was saying, and it made her buckle, climaxing again as Alps' thick base made her convulse with another climax. Alps hissed through his teeth.

"Go on, love. Burst inside her. Let her feel it. It's been rough, hasn't it, Neit? Feeling so bad all the time, not knowing where your friends are. Not knowing what happened to them? And worst of all, thinking the only real friends you had were going to hate you forever, or even kill you when you saw them next, and now, all you can think is that you are going to be so full of the very thing that you thought you'd never know..." Alps gritted his teeth. This was something very different than mere sex that Nidaja was doing to Neit. And it showed. It completely overtook the girl, and she buckled and sobbed with pleasure of every imaginable kind. Her heart was stoked as powerfully as the flaring nova inside her body as she positively –gushed– into Alps' lap.

"FFFUCK!" Alps barked, uncharacteristically swearing, and then leaning down, still not able to move. "Please, Nidaja... I have to cum..." he whimpered.

"I'm not stopping you." Nidaja panted, grinning as she pulled him tighter to her front, wagging.

"I can't move!" he barked.

"You don't need to, sex isn't physical." The general stated, as if making this another important lesson for the wolf.

"NnnngaaaAAAAAH!" sobbed Neit, convulsing hard around Alps again.

"See? She doesn't need to move.

"Cum for meeeEEEE!" wailed the thief, her sex clutching so greedily and heavily on Alps' shaft that he felt if he didn't do what she said, he might not get it back! Alps groaned.

"I'm close!" he barked loudly, shameful that he was sure others in the inn could probably hear.

“Cum for her!” Nidaja barked.

“I... I..” Alps’ hips began to tighten and relax, even though he was held perfectly stable inside that tight wet heat. He could feel the barely gracing touch of Neit’s cervix.

“How does it feel Neit?” Nidaja growled savagely, lips drawn back in a snarl, though her tail continued to swish rapidly behind her. “How does it feel finding out that the only thing this master thief could never steal was hers to take all along?” Nidaja growled. “Does it feel good to know that as good as you feel now, *he’s* about to feel even better?” and the girl convulsed again. It was finally just enough for Alps, who roared out,

“Neeeeeeeeeeitt!!” and he jerked and spasmed hard as he burst inside her, his sack quivering, tightly bunched against his body as he emptied himself violently inside the bucking, squalling tan female as her body relented to the further abuse of another reeling climax. The male felt each jerk of her body, and knew it was from the sensation *she* was feeling of each powerful and copious jet of his thick seed over her sensitive cervix. Nidaja held the pair together tightly, not letting either move as the white lupine simply flooded her over the course of what felt like twenty minutes. Alps then slumped over the thief’s back, panting weakly as Nidaja let the belt go. Neit collapsed onto the bed, taking a few spattering droplets of pearly fluid from Alps’ still bouncing member along the small of her back.

“Very good you two. That’s what I call justice.” Nidaja barked, and then tugged Alps onto his back, making him yip softly, and sank down over him. Neit remained on her face in the pillows as Alps released a long, almost begging moan as the general suckled him clean, making his hips flex and squirm, oversensitivity making the wolf try to escape that heavenly mouth. Alps tried to reach over to Nidaja’s thighs again, and she sat down softly, stating casually, “I’ve ruined enough clothing for the moment, hon.” Her head over his softening shaft. “We have work to do today, and I’m the last one of us that needs to be cum-drunk and sexually exhausted. In case I need to fight later.

“Thank you, Nidaja.” Alps said, finally sitting up as the general relented on suckling his softening flesh. He looked shamefully at his soaked trousers, scented heavily of sex now. He should have wriggled out of them, but everything happened so quickly.

“You don’t need to thank me. It’s you who decided what was right. I simply knew that you would, given the chance.” Her soft tone made it apparent that she really had planned it. Maybe not to this level of success, but this would be a chance to heal, which Alps took hook line and sinker.

"You have ... so much of my gratitude; nothing I can do will come close to repaying you." Neit said to the general, unable to get off her face. She spoke, muffled, into the pillows. Nidaja rolled her carefully onto her back, and the tan-furred female panted out softly, "I will be loyal to you and your family for as long as you need me." She stated, blushing, her heaving chest straining against her shirt. The front of her skirt was as soaked as Alps' trousers. Nidaja smiled at the girl.

"You'll follow my command then?" she asked, wagging slowly. Neit nodded.

"Anything you wish, I shall try my best to succeed in for my friends. This is real treasure, not those baubles in the tower in Diera." She remarked.

"What if I asked you to steal for me?" Nidaja asked, perhaps playfully, it was hard to tell. Alps perked up inquisitively.

"Stealing is wrong." Neit whispered, frowning, likely trying to make it obvious those days were over.

"War is difficult. Sometimes dark things must be done to protect those you love." Nidaja stated. "You have a talent, Neit. Don't be unwilling to use it if it's genuinely needed. Be it by my order, you have no law to worry about. I may tell you to be sneaky, I may tell you to take something the royal family cannot. Life's not always fair, even for those with a better life than most. Would you do something everyone knew was wrong, if it was the only way to make things right?" the general asked genuinely. Alps widened his eyes at the asking of such a deep question after something that left him, at the very least, a bit addled.

Neit seemed to give that very real thought, even as she lay panting and emotionally and physically fulfilled. Her tail flopped lazily and wetly side to side. Alps thought hard about the connotation of what Nidaja asked. Sometimes, to prevent harm to many, sacrifices had to be made. Nidaja may have had to make many such sacrifices for her empire, sending friends and lovers into a battle she knew they could not come back from. Alps thought about that. He had done exactly what Nidaja was referring to. He'd gone against his own lover's wishes, and even against the very laws that bound him to do what he knew in his heart was the right thing. This was why he had the life he had now. Being willing to do what Nidaja was asking became clear to Alps as a positive mark, not a negative one. It wasn't disobedience, as he had always been ashamed to think. It was love. After reflecting as long as Alps, Neit finally answered...

"I'd do it... but there would be a very key condition to my ever committing the crimes of my youth again..." she murmured. Nidaja arched a brow.

"Oh?" she asked. The white slave peered at her curiously as well.

“I’d have to be punished.” Neit remarked, gazing at Alps. The slave blushed crimson and looked away, wagging his tail.

## Sirius, Book III

### The Essence

*Comments or Questions?*

Contact Alps: [sarsis@gmail.com](mailto:sarsis@gmail.com)

Or just drop a note at: <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/sarsis/>

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## Chapter 9

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Once again, Nidaja found herself sitting in front of a fire, underground, with a different species, all to try to help Alps. She had her chin on her hands, her elbows on her knees as she sat in barely anything at all, while her armor dried in front of the fire. She looked across from her, where a hyena sat, not wearing much either. His clothes baked in front of his side of the fire. They had been rained on a bit before they could find refuge in a limestone cavern, which was not overly dry in and of its self. The strong, musky scent of Persi Moss hung in the darkness around them, and the dripping and trickling of what was probably an underground stream or natural run-off deeper in the inaccessible recesses of the cave could be heard.

"You are sister to this Queen of Amani, yis?" the strong-looking male hyena said, finally breaking the silence. Nidaja looked up, actually welcoming his words, since she was bored from just waiting in the darkness. She prodded the fire a bit, helping dry the slightly wetter wood a bit more in hopes that it would catch before the flames died out.

"Yes, Nidaja Razelle, General of the Amanian Defense Forces and Sister to Queen Nita Razelle." She said softly.

"Girl who ees bringing heem to us, she smelled of mating with this wulf you bring us." The spotted male said casually, nodding so that his tall spikes of red hair bobbed a bit.

"Err... Yes." Nidaja replied. Suddenly, quiet seemed a little easier subject to bear. He had a very potent sense of smell.

"It ees common then for before wedding to lie with other girl?" the large shape in the darkness added. Nidaja shifted her weight a little from side to side. She was starting to regret being so happy about him talking. She had not expected he'd be asking such intimate questions right away. Then again, the general did not know if Asuna culture treated those discussions more openly than the Amani did, since they were openly more savage.

"Not really. Alps is a very unusual... Um... example of..." the general tried to figure out the best way to explain what he had been for so long now.

“You ees laying with heem too, yis? Sisters share? This ees not uncommon in Asuna tribes either. Family ees strong. Family ees share.” He nodded. Nidaja felt hot under her fur, where moments ago she had been cold. She folded her ears back.

“Well, that’s not entirely what made all that come about really. It’s not that common.” she tried to explain.

“Ees secret then? You and Alps? Maybe sister is not sharing?” he asked, leaning forward. The general looked the male in the eyes. It was hard to believe how interested in this sort of thing he actually was.

“May I ask a question, as you are so curious about these personal things?” the green-furred female asked.

“Yis?” the hyena replied.

“What could possibly be interesting to you about such intimate details about your enemy?” Nidaja asked.

“Nidaja Razelle ees not my enemy.” he stated flatly. “Nidaja ees not attacking Asuna villages and stealing Asuna food. Nidaja ees just not liking Asuna. That ees not making enemy.” He stated. “That ees making closed-minded hateful girl.” He added with a nod. The general cringed a little. It was true, off course. She felt immediately vile for being called on it, but knew immediately that it was pretty open and pointless bias at this point.

“Okay, I see your point there. I won’t call you an enemy then. But a stranger I still am. Why do you want to know these trivial things? They don’t really help you any, and you seem to be more thoughtful than to just like idle chat.” the general stated.

“I am never just talking to Amani girl before. I am never understanding them and knowing them. They ees running always from spotted males. Never wanting to chat. So I am smelling that you and other girl ees both liking very much this Alps, and wanting to know why, since queen is supposed to be liking heem too. It is okay, or no?” he rumbled, his smooth, soft voice a pleasant tone in the near darkness. Nidaja still could not get over how calm and intelligent he seemed. For so long, she’d regarded the Asuna as barbarians, and this one certainly was not. Perhaps he’d been trained like this as he was supposed to interact with the Amanians.

“I am not like every Amani girl either, if that’s helpful at all to you.” Nidaja said coldly. “But it’s true, Alps found a very unusual social ... niche. His original purpose when we bought him as a slave was to be a personal servant, an

intimate companion for the queen, since the war and her social requirements made romance pretty much out of the question.” The general tried to explain. She didn’t want Nita to sound depraved. “This was, of course, my idea, not hers, but it turned out that he was something she very much needed, and in the end, wanted.”

“This is happy story for slave wulf, but ees not explaining why you and other girl ees smelling of him too.” the hyena stated. “Not if you say ees not just sharing.”

“Alps is someone we all love dearly.” The wolf female answered without thinking. “Not just Nita. We all love him. He’s very close with us, and he’s got the purest, kindest, most genuine spirit of anyone I’ve ever met.”

“Ees Letai. All Letai supposed to be like that.” The male stated.

“Maybe. Alps sure is like that, Letai or not, and he didn’t have it easy growing up and all. His previous mistress was horrible. I don’t know how he ended up being so...” Nidaja gritted her teeth. Part of her would always want to strangle his mistress for what she’d done to him. The lady lupine was not aware that Chana had already met her end.

“Nidaja ees wanting heem? If sister ees never to marry, ees Nidaja marrying heem?” the hyena asked.

“No. I’m a fighter. Fighters don’t live long. I’d bring sadness to a family. That’s not part of my future.” Nidaja said.

“Nidaja does not get to have happiness? She fights so others can, but she cannot? Even if she ees not living long?” the male asked.

“You are kind, Asuna, to think that.” Nidaja said softly.

“Lyat.” Came his quick reply.

“Huh?” Nidaja asked.

“Ees my name. Lyat Rasenko.” He patted his chest.

“Oh!” Nidaja stated, a little embarrassed suddenly that she had not yet asked him his name. “I’m not without happiness, Lyat.” The general stated, leaning forward, suddenly feeling much more personable since his name had come up. She prodded the fire a little, making it flare up so she could see his eyes. He wore knee-length canvas shorts, which had been under his shin-length trousers. They were dry now, as was his fur, through the course of their conversation.

“Alps ees giving you happiness, even after Nita ees being married?” Lyat asked.

“That was the idea. He’d be a life-mate to her, and sire children perhaps, but I can’t imagine his close friends not knowing his intimacy.” she stated softly.

“More than you and other girl?” came Lyat’s questioned reply. Nidaja sighed, fearing that she was making this sound a lot more depraved than it was. They all shared a very powerful and loving bond. It could not be seen as being insincere or trivially playful.

“Quite a few. Alps is very good at bringing happiness to those around him. And when he does that, other good things happen. It seems like since we met him, we’ve all be pushed in some positive way, and life has gotten better. Maybe he’s lucky, maybe it’s something Letai do if that’s what he is, but it’s not just playing around to any of us. He’s touched us, and we are very protective of him. That’s why we have to get him back. You don’t want to know the dam-break you are going to see if the queen thinks the Asuna hurt him.” The general clarified.

“Rios is not hurting him. But you ees maybe not looking at bigger picture, Nidaja Razelle.” Lyat said.

“Bigger picture. What do you mean? What’s bigger than Alps being the life mate of the queen?”

“He will only know loss and pain.” The hyena stated flatly. Nidaja gritted her teeth. That picture of Alps’ existence angered Nidaja because she knew that before she’d met him, it was the day to day truth.

“He has only ever known happiness with us.” The green-furred female said defensively.

“The Asuna get rumors of heem already. Some say he ees Letai, so who else may hear rumor, Nidaja? What happens if Mannus knows? Can you or even queen protect him? How many you think dark one kill to get last Letai?” the hyena asked seriously, his tone very dark. Nidaja cringed. Of all the things she thought about when she considered that Alps *might* be Letai, that was something she found herself shocked to have never considered.

“Mannus... would burn Diera to the ground. Oh living essence...” the general murmured, a jolt of pain stabbing through her. Alps would be ruined by knowing his very existence brought even the chance of that.



“Alps will learn of the danger. Reika will tell him. It ees being part of why Asuna empress is taking him. Wulf might be everything to Amani queen, but he might be only thing for Asuna.” Lyat stated.

“I am not sure I understand.” Nidaja said, still wavering with despair over the unrealized complication. “Because he can free people from the Shadowfall?” she asked. Lyat widened his eyes.

“Free people? He freed himself, that was rumor, but you suspect he could free more?” he asked. Nidaja gritted her teeth. That was foolish of her! She just gave away a very large piece of information that she did not want anyone, let alone the Asuna to have, and she could not lie her way out of it with Lyat. He’d see right through it.

“This is a very imperative secret, Lyat. You will not speak of this to any but your empress. I beg of you, it would be epically ruinous.” The general pleaded, stepping up and walking over to Lyat, getting on her knees in front of him, her nose almost to his as she looked into his eyes, trying to determine once and for all if he was the sort to be dangerous holding this knowledge. Very few outside the high council knew of this secret. Not everyone even in the high council knew.

“I am starting to think this ees kind of secret that kills.” The spotted male stated calmly, “But I will hear of it. It may help in understanding importance of this Letai.” Nidaja put her hands on Lyat’s shoulders, steadying herself. What was she doing? Why was she confiding something like this in him? Was it his calm strength? Had she become so unable to stand on her own? Was the loss of Alps that crippling?

“Alps is no longer the last Letai, Lyat, if indeed that is what he is. The Letai are no longer extinct, regardless of what Alps is.” the lady lupine stated with a sigh. “When he escaped the Shadowfall, he released two powerful Letai Priestesses. It is possible that he could release more. Maybe all of them could be freed if we had the Shadowfall crystals, or knew more about how they worked. Mannus may not, even knowing the rumor of Alps’ existence, understand the danger that slave represents. We know the Letai were destroyed because he feared them, and if they come back when he doesn’t expect them, he’d have a lot to worry about.” Lyat gritted his teeth.

“I curse it.” He whispered. “I curse my ability to know you speak truth.” The hyena stated. “This ees deadly secret. This is bending very wind of fate to you, and now to me. I am thinking maybe the reports that reach my empress are more complete than either of us realizes. I am not knowing why Rios ees taking heem away from you, but if she ees knowing even part of this, or suspecting, than she takes him because she ees thinking he ees vulnerable, and does not want Mannus to get heem. This ees secret from Mannus, this mission I am on.

Very high risk. Mannus burn down all of Asuna villages for this. What ees Rios thinking?" Lyat asked himself. "What can we do for Alps, if no one can protect heem? We can hide heem, and make the rumors go away, spread stories about fraud or his death? Would it be believable?"

"Well, we have to get him back first, if we are to save either of our villages from ruin." Nidaja said solidly. Returning without Alps was out of the question. She could discuss the real problem of Mannus' retribution with her sister and build a plan with Misty when they got back, but there would be no leaving him somewhere, even if it seemed safe. Nidaja knew her sister would never forgive her.

"Reika ees trusted. He make it to Rios safe. Nidaja can talk with empress, and resolve conflict, I am thinking. But, Nidaja..." Lyat said softly, putting his hands on her shoulders as well, the two closer together as he whispered. "He will know what going back can mean. If he wishes to stay away, will you take him unwilling? He may not stay with us, but if he ees what you say, he will not endanger his friends. What then?"

And with that, Nidaja just shattered. All the strength and composure she could muster could not stand in the face of the very real thought of losing him, not because someone stole him, or someone killed him, but because in his grief, he'd not return. The thought of him feeling and being completely alone was far worse than any thought of him being dead and gone. She dropped her head against Lyat's chest with a thump and just sobbed. This took the hyena by surprise and he wrapped his arms around the general, gritting his teeth, seeming a bit at a loss to how to deal with her crying on him, instead of trying to kill him.

"Nidaja wulf, don't do that, I am not being hopeless, I am meaning Nidaja should be asking heem and making sure ees... ees going back what he wants, and letting heem know his friends will take all risks to have heem. Don't let heem doubt..." he said softly.

"I *know* Alps, Lyat, he won't get us killed. He'd run. I know he would." Nidaja cried. "He'd rather die than harm us!"

"What would happen to his friends if he left?" asked the hyena. "What would happen to your sister? What would happen to you? Which are you thinking ees being worse? Dying? Or not knowing where he ees? This he will know too. He will know what it does. Or you will tell heem." Lyat whispered. "He will go with you, but don't make heem go without making sure he ees knowing that you and sister accept the risk. Don't tell heem you will take action to protect heem. Tell heem that you will act to protect you, and he will still be there with you. This ees only way you keep heem, if he is being what you say he is to you." Nidaja thought about this for a while, sniffing away her tears, and then looking up quietly at the dark, savage eyes of her traveling companion.

"Why do you help me, Lyat? You know it may not be what your empress wants." The general asked.

"I have a clear understanding of what my empress wants of me." The hyena stated, perhaps clearer than anything he'd said before. His voice was deeper and more proud, and he seemed even more mature than he'd sounded until that point. For all the things he had perhaps been trained to say to an Amanian general by his empress, this was from the heart. Nidaja peered at him curiously.

"What do you think she wants you to do here?" she asked.

"Empress would want me to give hope, because that is what empress wants for all of us. There is little hope left, but she doles it out like wine at festival. We know the darkness. We know that our spots drift against a backdrop of blood and fire, and yet, she whispers to each of us when we are alone with her. You tell a secret to Lyat, I tell a secret to Nidaja." He leaned in, his velvet lips cused into her tall, eager ear as her heart sinfully skipped a beat from his closely pressed body.

"A secret?" Nidaja asked mindlessly, a wistful whisper, born of her trying to figure out why her body tingled against the sturdily built male. She could not think of anything more heavily taboo than how scandalously close he was to her right that moment.

"In our ears, Rios Dominis, the empress, whispers that a day will come where darkness will fall so black that our spots will shine like stars within it, and then, in that darkness, one will rise up who treads the darkness like the brightened plains, and knows no sadness in the face of eternal suffering. It ees this spirit we will embrace, and the darkness will fall, and the sun will rise over the Asuna once more. Mannus demands of us blood and sweat, the very pelts off our backs, but Rios will spit in his face to give us hope. There is no open hostility to the Amani now, Nidaja. We know hope we had forgotten, us few who have heard this secret. We believe. We believe in our empress, and the coming dawn. She said it will be during her life that this light will shine, and we do not question it. She risks death for treason to utter the words, and she spreads the secret among those with the strength to help make it happen. We only wait for the one who walks in the darkness, Nidaja. And we think your white-furred friend ees the one. Rios will see heem, and she will know. That is my secret." Lyat said in an eerily calm tone.

"What will she do if he's the one she's waiting for?" Nidaja asked.

"I do not know what she intends, but I know, I believe just as she does, our endless night will be over." He said.

"Do you really think the hyena would turn against their dark master?" the lady lupine asked, a little cynical.

"Do you think Alps could make them?" Lyat asked in reply. The general looked up into his eyes, her own widening a little. She had not really thought about what effect *Alps* would have on the empress, or others he was likely to come in contact with. There had been an almost bizarre level of social interference that seemed to follow the slave everywhere he went. He changed people. He affected most of those he came in close contact with. He even changed Nita. Would Rios be any different? Nidaja leaned forward a little, thinking about it. Crying had made her weak, she could feel it. Now, the warmth of the fire calmed her, and she felt the recovering warmth in this cave as it dried from the heat. Just to think about her lover made her feel better. He had something of a gift where bringing positive change was concerned, and the thought of what Alps might be doing to others where he was even as Nidaja rested in this dreary cave made the general feel cozy, even if just for a moment, and, wanting to cast off her own darkness, she let herself revel in it a bit.

"Lady Nidaja?" came Lyat's voice after a few quiet moments.

"Yes?" the general asked, her head still leaned forward, eyes closed.

"What are you doing?" his voice was soft and inquisitive. Nidaja opened her eyes. Both her hands were on Lyat's broad chest, her claw tips slipping back and forth through his chest-fur in long, slow, caressing strokes, exactly as she might have done with Alps. Nidaja blushed a bit, jerking her head up.

"I-" she stammered. "I was just... I mean I'm not..." she hung her head. She had to be very careful what she said, because if she lied, his assumption could be a lot worse than the truth.

"I didn't hate it, I just, I don't..." the larger male said dismissingly, seeming to try to make Nidaja feel less on the spot, even as her fingertips were all over his peppering spots.

"I've grown used to touch." Nidaja explained, as truthfully as she could. "I didn't need it before, but now I do. It helps. Life's so hard. Touching like this makes it better. I'm sure you know." she stated solidly, trying not to seem weak while at the same time knowing that right at that moment, she was.

"I don't know this touch." Lyat replied.

"What, gentle touching? You don't know?" Nidaja asked incredulously. For a hyena, Lyat was a splendid specimen. She refused to believe he'd never been held lovingly. At least his mother would have.

“No, I am knowing gentleness, I had good family. I am not knowing Nidaja’s touch. Girl Asuna is not touching their male like this. Ees biting and pushing, then running and teasing, that ees how we touch when we are close. When we want to be close.” He stated with a nod.

“I don’t want to be that kind of close. Not like girl Asuna.” The general said a little more loudly, blushing hotly under her fur. She moved her hands away from Lyat’s chest, hugging her middle to look more withdrawn. “That’s not what I meant.” She cursed herself silently for having very openly broken a severe taboo.

“You touch me to make you feel good, and you are afraid that you might feel good. This ees why Amani confuse Asuna. You want thing you won’t let yourself have.” He said with a nod.

“I don’t want it.” Nidaja barked.

“If you did, what would stop you?” Lyat said, smiling to Nidaja. He suddenly seemed a lot more confident with her than he was a moment ago. The general bit her lip. Did she smell like she was lying? Was she lying? She shook her head, starting to get flustered.

“The fact that you are an Asuna would stop me, Lyat. Do you know how much almost everyone I know would frown on that? How can you even think of it? Don’t your people frown on it? Is it something you’ve thought of before now? You’ve been spending too much time on the wrong side of the plains.” she said, nodding curtly.

“I admit, I have been thinking of it sometimes. Some Amani girls have great beauty. Lyat likes the green ones. Very thoughtful and healthy and powerful. Strong ladies is beautiful to Asuna.” He chuckled. Nidaja could not honestly tell if he was just teasing her.

“That’s flattering. I’ve always thought of hyena males as slobbering, frenzied, savage walls of spotted meat, so you will excuse my lack of intimate ideas about them.” The general stated. She felt so embarrassed by even being forced to think about whether or not she’d have entertained the idea of intimate contact with the Asuna. At the same time, she did not see Lyat that way at all, and that was bothering her even more.

“I am thinking in your company maybe they are not being able to help it.” Lyat chuckled.

“Surely my kind do not arouse you, Lyat. Even if I am attractive, we are not typically very nice to Asuna, regardless of whether or not we are wrong to

feel the way we do.” The general pleaded, wanting to shake the thought away. It would be a lot to carry with her for the next few days of travel if she thought he might be watching her sleep and fantasizing about her.

“Then you admit you might be wrong to despise Asuna!” Lyat barked triumphantly. Nidaja gritted her teeth. What a mean trick! She turned and thumped his arm with her fist, barking out,

“Hey, I never said that! I just said even if I were!” she crossed her arms over her chest, suddenly a little self conscious about how close-fitting her cotton shirt and dark cotton shorts were on her.

“Does thought of me pressed close against your body, keeping you warm appall you, Nidaja?” Lyat asked, smirking. While normally Nidaja would welcome his relaxed nature with her, as it made for easier traveling, this was a little *too* relaxed!

“That’s not fair, Lyat. You could say I was lying when I answered to fluster me!” Nidaja barked defiantly. “I refuse to answer.”

“You are so quick to defend yourself, but that ees what we know so well, both of us warriors. How those we fight act when they are afraid. This ees no different from fighting, what we do now.” Lyat rumbled. “It ees contest of will, and your will ees shaking. Lyat ees stronger?” he asked, still on his knees in front of the defensive general. Nidaja growled, and then lurched forward, pushing Lyat back, straddling his hips, nose close to his.

“Then I answer. No, I am not interested in holding you.” the general rumbled, her nose close to his.

“You lie.” Lyat said.

“I told you that you’d say that, just to try to shake me, well, I’m not shaken Lyat.” The lady lupine said with a grin.

“That ees not changing the fact that you do not speak truth.” The hyena said.

“You are starting to anger me!” The general barked.

“I am starting to frighten you.” he said, looking up at Nidaja. “Even though you are overpowering hyena, he scares you, yis? You are afraid body wants what mind refuses. Body is stronger maybe. You give in and regret it, this ees what you fear. I have good nose.” He chuckled.

"I'm seriously about to slap that good nose right through the back of your head." Nidaja bristled. At the same time, that lingering doubt boiled within her. That was the thing that was making her more angry.

"I am knowing you already, General. You regret injustice more than insult. Will you lie, then break my accusing nose to hide it? Do it Nidaja. Try. Prove that you hate me that much."

"I don't hate you, but that doesn't mean I want to have sex with you, Lyat." The general growled. "When did you become so pompous and arrogant?"

"I only act like this with those who lie to me." Lyat said soothingly.

"I am not lying. I don't want to have sex with you." she hissed.

"You are not lying now. This ees true. But you lied before. You said you did not want to hold me. You want to be held. You cannot hide that." The hyena said. Nidaja paused a moment, and then just dropped, her chest right over his, her chin over his shoulder and she sighed.

"I hate your stupid nose." The wolf female growled, arms pulling up along Lyat's sides to let her hold him. His strong, warm body was perfectly fit beneath her, a nice and secure place to rest. He was a lot larger than Alps, and not exactly a pain to cuddle with. She could not even begin to deny that.

"Truth is good thing, yis?" Lyat asked.

"It's not always so great. It's just convenient for you right now. My mother would eat her own tail if she saw me snuggled up to a big, half-naked hyena, you know that? Do you have any idea what kind of trouble this is?" the general rumbled. Her hands slipped up over his chest, and she stroked his fur, leaning up enough, propping herself with one elbow, as to actually make a show of the fact that she was casually and even tenderly touching Lyat.

"I understand, Nidaja. I am not to be teasing you more about it. Only wanting to show how useful ees my nose. It ees nice to hold though, this ees good truth. And your mother not watching. Ees okay." He chuckled.

"Yes, Lyat. It's nice to hold. And when I have much to worry about, it helps. I ... appreciate it." the lady wolf stated.

"Nidaja, I can say something serious?" Lyat asked.

"Now's not a good time." The Amanian said, her head resting over the spotted male's shoulder. She just wanted to be content a moment in front of the fire.

“Imagine for this moment, Mannus ees gone. No more Mannus. Like, tomorrow, you ees waking, and hees armies, they lay in ruin, and hees darkness is lifted... What do you do?” Lyat asked. Nidaja thought about that a moment, hands cupping at the firm and muscular form beneath her as she remained straddled on his hips.

“I guess I would turn my attention to bandits. Brigands and the like. There is always room for a general.” She said.

“That ees not what I am meaning. Would the Asuna be your new enemy? Would we fear losing our homes to the Amani armies, even as we collect the pieces of our scattered families and dreams? If Mannus fell, would we fall too, because for so long our conflict has been forced?” Lyat said softly, looking up at the cavern ceiling. Nidaja lifted her head, looking into his eyes. She wanted to tell him no. But that would be her answer. Would others push for retaliation against the treacherous Asuna? Would the royal house be able to deflect the war, as ugly as it would be? The people, especially those in border areas, would be afraid of the Asuna, and want them driven out. What would be the end to that?

“Our people are afraid of yours, Lyat. They have been for centuries now. I can’t promise there would be an easy peace the next day. I would bet that fear and distrust is on both sides. It would not be easy.” Nidaja stated.

“This ees honest answer from you, Nidaja. I appreciate that. There will be a day that the Uruk armies do not push us, and they do not invade your lands with our blood and sweat upon their backs. I still believe our empress. This darkness will end. The winds of fate that push us together now give us only the chance to choose. I will commit myself to you, even against the will of my empress, if you will promise me only one thing, Nidaja.” The hyena rumbled.

“You risk your very spirit in committing yourself against your empress and you know it. The essence does not look favorably upon treason.” The general stated. “I would not force you into such a promise, but I will hear out your request.” Nidaja looked intently into Lyat’s eyes. She could not believe how very deeply she could feel herself bonding with this fellow warrior. Was she betraying herself, or was this a boon to her existence as giving herself to Alps had been? She listened intently to Lyat.

“Forgive the Asuna, Nidaja. I ask only that you forgive the Asuna.” Lyat said, his tone so deeply mournful that it caused Nidaja to have to swallow back tears. She felt herself tremble. There had been a few other times in her life when she was so moved. Alps had been responsible for most of those. She closed her eyes and cleared her mind and her heavy heart for just a moment. She could not make a false promise here, even if it was just one she was not



sure of. She had to be genuine. She looked back on her dislike of the spotted plains tribes of her world. Cities burned, savage attacks, and the centuries they toiled to help build the Uruk that cared not whether a warrior was torn to bits, or a day-old child. And there lay Lyat beneath her, pleading that he be forgiven to prevent the very retribution she knew would be at hand if such a day as Lyat prayed for ever occurred.

“I cannot convince all my people, Lyat.” Nidaja whispered.

“That is not what I ask for.” He replied.

“Why do you need my forgiveness?” the general asked, feeling herself choking up more. This was hard. She knew how very big a request this really was.

“I don’t need the forgiveness; I can forge that for myself. I want you to forgive all the Asuna. Forgive every one of us everywhere, even those who are sure to fall prey to hatred like so many before. Forgive us all, Nidaja.” His soothing voice caressed, making her ears slick back. She swallowed again.

“Why is this important to you?” the general asked, still trying to figure out how she could possibly adequately comply with such a request.

“The Asuna do not need it, Lady Nidaja.” Lyat said with deep earnest. “You do.” The words took a moment to register with the general, but she suddenly realized, with a shock, what he meant. Lyat was not trying to rid his race of the blame for past and future atrocities. This had little to do with them. He was trying to rid Nidaja of the hate. Her mind sharpened to a point, remembering something very defined about the one she was trying to save. Alps could not bare ill will. That very thing had come up in his need to reconcile with Neit. He would not even let harm come to Chana, with all she had done to him. Everything that he did was out of loyalty and love. It was for that reason she would go right into the mouth of hell to save him. For a brief moment, Nidaja could almost see into Alps’ very soul as she held herself against Lyat. He didn’t just try to act happy. The white slave they had come to love had forced hatred from his heart completely. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she looked into Lyat’s eyes and felt a sudden rush of tingling crush through her like a tidal wave. No challenge had been set before her as grand as what she was now asking herself to do. Give it all up. Give up every ill thought, and look at the Asuna without hatred.

And in that moment of self-realization, Nidaja forgave the Asuna. Yes, they were dangerous. Yes, they killed many of her friends and family in their actions and inactions, they had burned cities to the ground and killed travelers and warriors alike, but one thing suddenly gained crystal clarity in the general’s heart.

Hating the Asuna would not change them. She could fight the Asuna to protect herself, to prevent towns from burning, or to keep travelers safe, but she could not hate the Asuna. Nidaja looked up into Lyat's eyes and cried out,

"I forgive them. I forgive them all, Lyat. I let go of my hatred, and will look at you with eyes unclouded..." she sobbed. "What have I been doing to myself all these years? Was I so sick with... with..." she thumped her head on Lyat's chest and shivered.

"Ees alright, Lady Nidaja." Lyat rumbled. "You will get better. You recover, just like Lyat. I had this disease too. Rios cured me. You ees not forgetting your promise. I am thinking... that you ees finding a new strength if you always remember." The hyena said, looking up into Nidaja's eyes. The general looked back, and then, heavily, she sank forward, her head tilting to the side as her mouth embraced his own. Lyat's eyes opened wide, then closed as her lips pulled tight against his, and she kissed him for a long, sensual time, hands cupping behind his head to hold him near. Nidaja knew very clearly that what she was doing would get her booted out of Diera if anyone else saw it, and yet, she could not remember a time before meeting Alps that she had ever wanted to kiss someone so much. How much hate could she give up? How good could it feel each time she gave up a little more? She was drunk with the joy of it, and simply could not bring herself to care about the taboo.

She gripped Lyat's shoulders and pushed herself tighter against him, exhaling heavily through her nose as she felt a familiar warm rush through her body. She closed her eyes, unable to believe what she was doing, and far more shocked at the things her mind now freely invited her to try. She groaned softly as she felt Lyat's tongue push into her mouth in the kiss. Apparently, he wasn't having much trouble letting himself cast aside the taboo. The canvas shorts he wore didn't do much to discourage her either, as she felt that his firming form beneath them was swelling just as proud in length as her white lupine lover, but quite obviously a great deal thicker. Lyat's muscular body lurched a little in the eager press of Nidaja's own hips, her mouth pulling from his rather suddenly to let the general gasp for air, the flickering reddish-orange light of the fire casting dancing shadows around the cave.

The general looked at the strong, handsome hyena beneath her, seeing his glistening eyes, half closed, gazing pleadingly up at her, as if begging her not to stop. She gritted her teeth, and then inhaled deeply, arms crossing in front of her, and dragging her shirt upward, baring youthful, firm breasts to the hyena. She felt him stir to life between her thighs, that thick, swelling member forming a very obvious ridge for her to rest herself intimately on. The lady wolf then groaned loudly as she felt both of Lyat's large hands cup heavily over her breasts and squeeze and roll them, touching teasingly at her nipples as she arched her back in a rewarding grind against that hidden shaft. Lyat panted out softly,

“Nidaja... You must... know this ees not what I had intended... to happen here, my interests were innocent, you have to believe-“ the hyena was cut short when the general grabbed his muzzle in her hand and held it shut.

“...don’t care, Lyat. Gonna see if I’m anything like your fantasies...” she lowered her chest, bringing her nipple within reach of the dark muzzle of her spotted captive squirming beneath her thighs. “Or are you all talk? Is this a little too tabooooo?” the general purred. She then barked out in pleasure and shock as a tight muzzle captured that thick, perked nub and Lyat suckled eagerly upon it, rolling his tongue against it with heated determination. “That’s right. You aren’t forcing me. We can regret this all we want tomorrow.” Nidaja then slipped her hand down his tummy, and pushed her fingertips into the front of his shorts, feeling the slick and hard tip of his tapered shaft, already glistening with his pre. Hyena or wolf, the two males didn’t feel so different when she pushed her fingertips together and tweaked his sensitive tip, making him flinch and jerk from oversensitivity, and having that large, dangerous spotted male laying beneath her, whimpering helplessly under her touch was furiously empowering to the general. She might not be able to easily best him in combat from what she could tell before, but now, he was completely in her control.

She delighted in how his muscles flexed, and how his lips pulled tight, and how he bit at his bottom lip as she stroked and teased his tip. It remained hidden in his shorts for now, but the general could not help but want to peek. She was not a virgin even when she’d met Alps, but a Hyena was different. This was new and exotic to her. The lupine female swirled her thumb in circles over the tip as she backed up down his legs, and then untied the front of his light, slightly tattered under-shorts. Lyat’s chest rose and fell heavily, heaving as he squirmed.

“Feels so good...” the hyena murmured in his deep, normally dark voice. Nidaja’s eyes widened as she freed a thick, pulsing ebony shaft from his light tan shorts, pulling them down his hips. He had to be nearly twice as thick as Alps, though perhaps not quite as long. Still, the thought of squeezing him into her made her shiver. It would be a tight fit. She wrapped her hand around it, and massaged up and down that glistening black flesh, the glistening pre pouring down over her knuckles. She crooned at how wet he was, quite a bit more than a wolf. She tentatively touched her tongue to the tip, making him literally whimper with fitful need and anticipation. He tasted no different from a wolf, really. In the end, there were not so many differences. Not enough to make him unappealing, for certain, especially not with how Nidaja was feeling. She engulfed half his throbbing shaft with her tight muzzle, the male grunted as he felt the pressure drop around his aching flesh, and that thick meat was drawn back out of the general’s suckling muzzle slowly, her tongue stroking wildly at his tip. She looked up at the nearly panicked-looking hyena and smiled, licking his shaft.

“You didn’t like that?” she asked teasingly.

“Girl Asuna do not... do that...” the spiky-haired gasped, trembling.

“That’s too baaaad...” Nidaja teased, and then she wrapped her hand around his base, screwing it in countermotions from her muzzle as it rose and fell over that hard, thick, pulsing shaft, the black flesh vanishing into her skillful muzzle each time. The hyena groaned out loudly, his hips rising off the cave floor as Nidaja worked over him.

“That ees too much... I’ll spill in your mouth if you keep- nnng..” he pleaded. “Gah!” he stiffened up as the general sped up, her hand stroking his length up and down as she suckled and lolled her tongue at his tip. The hyena immediately made good on his word, thick torrents of his sweetish spunk spraying heavily into the general’s muzzle. It was a bit thicker than Alps’ normal release, though not quite as copious. Nidaja suspected that was more because he had not exactly been primed much before she took him over the edge.

Lyat twitched and grunted as he spent himself heavily upon the back of the general’s tongue, held half way inside her muzzle as she just suckled and stroked him with in her muzzle, that hand that had been riding the lower half of his shaft just cupping and cradling his balls lovingly as they emptied forcefully for her. Finally, as the climax calmed, and the over-sensitive hyena began to protest, the wolf drew her lips off of him, and she looked up at the Asuna warrior, huffing from the heat of his passion. Nidaja carefully rose to her knees, and removed her cotton shorts, leaving her hot mound bare, her puffy lips visible as she scooted up alongside Lyat, caressing his tummy. His hand moved from along his side, right up behind the general. She parted her thighs, putting her hands on his chest as he pushed two fingers into her sex with a wet, audible squish.

“Mmmnh, yis, Nidaja... Ees okay I pleasure you now?” he asked, beginning to push his fingers in and out, the panting female lowering her head and nodding. The general allowed this intrusion for a while, looking at the semi-flaccid spent shaft twitching back to life slowly as he aroused himself with her pleasure. The lupine found this to be a commendable trait. Something she had tried to teach Alps, after all. The pleasure of another should always force you into your second wind. She rolled her hips eagerly, enticing him to stroke her clit, but he seemed to think penetration was all that was necessary. This was frustrating to the general. Alps seemed to figure it out so easily. Still, she decided better than to try to tutor him in it, as it might insult or shame him. Instead, she stroked his stirring member back to life with gentle hands as he worked her sex, pumping his fingers in and out wetly.

Once she had him throbbing in her hand readily again, even amid the occasional stroking of her tongue, she moved back over him, her motion making him curious enough that he drew his hand from her, and his eyes went wide as

she moved over his hips, pairing herself up with him, lining up for the most intimate act.

“Oh, Nidaja, you ees not having to do that. I ees already felt pleasure of - HAAAAH!” he cried out as the lady lupine wrapped her hand around his thick cock, moved him into position, and pushed her self down his thick length hard and slow. Nidaja moaned with boiling lust as her flesh spread around his cock so tightly that she felt almost a pinch of pain from it. The hyena trembled heavily, swearing softly in his own tongue, seeming unable to believe that the powerful, revered general of the Amanian forced was now arching her back for him, grinding her clit happily on the base of his shaft. As he throbbed inside her, the general rode him with lurching hips, stroking herself toward her climax on top of him, panting freely.

“But... I get to feel pleasure too. Exactly how I want it.” Nidaja growled, pitching herself back and forth a bit as her hips rose and fell, the loud slurp of her sex suckling on his thick shaft as lewd a sound as that cavern would ever hear. As thick as he was inside her, it was making it easy for the general to rub herself to climax on the base of his shaft. She gleefully worked herself toward that, unashamed, unworried, and regretless. Climax came easily to the green-furred lupine, and her hot, tangy nectar poured over the grayish tummy fur of her pitching, moaning playmate, and down his balls and between his thighs. She pushed herself down harder on him as she squealed in tense release, and then began to ride him hard and fast, letting herself crest with the waves of her release. Without warning, she felt the hyena tense, bucking hard, and then her knees rose up off the hard stone floor as his strong muscles pushed him up deep inside her, enough that she felt the flash of heat on her cervix when his second climax rocked him, spewing thick ribbons of sticky hyena essence hard to her deepest intimacy. That set the general off again, and she roared her approval, bucking and flinching, before heaving, panting, burning bodies slumped back to the cool cave floor, their fur caked in dirt and lust.

They laid there together for a while, the general's hips lurching and rolling softly, nursing her and him both through their afterglow. Nidaja's mind was spinning, imagining that the hyena was just as shocked at what had happened, but even as her mind cleared from the lust, Nidaja could not bring herself to regret it. He had cured her hatred. It seemed somehow appropriate that she lift a burden of a different kind from the hyena. The general smiled as she rested on top of him to let him recover. She found herself greedily hoping it would rain all night. The lady wolf closed her eyes as she thought about the one she was still going to save. He'd not be angry at this. He'd be proud of her, she thought. In the meantime, Nidaja decided to make her trip with Lyat as pleasant and informative as possible... for both of them.

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Reika knelt beside Alps as he tried to get back up from the muddy riverbed. Normally dried out, the rain had soaked it pretty well, and it was not easy going. He was holding most of supplies himself as Reika seemed content to just hold Bone. She said sternly,

“How is wulf being slave? You ees not strong! You ees lazy! How you getting so lazy!?” Alps huffed out in reply softly,

“I’m not ... used to this kind of work anymore. I don’t carry packs for miles when I live in the castle. That’s not what I do.” He panted.

“What ees you doing there, then, that ees made you so soft?” the hyena grumbled. “What ees your purpose in castle?”

“I ... I clean and run errands.” Alps stated, suddenly regretting he went that direction. He didn’t want to talk about his real main purpose.

“Asuna nose says you lie. What you really do?” Reika asked darkly, making it obvious she’d not be lied to again without some intervention from Bone, who the slave had definitely grown to fear.

“I... I tend to the queen’s personal needs. Those of other members of the high counsel too.” the wolf remarked.

“You ees telling truth, but ees not being very open. You ees consort then? Toy for them. There ees no shame in this. Ees not uncommon for Asuna too.”

“I’m not just a consort.” Alps growled, feeling a little defensive. He didn’t just sit on a bed and wait for people to use him. He genuinely loved everyone he shared himself with.

“Nose ees saying this true. What else ees you.”

“I’m their friend and lover. And don’t you forget it. I am there to bring them happiness, not just be a bedroom toy.” he barked, re-shouldering his packs and trying to pull himself out of the muck again.

“But you weak! What ees happen if you have to protect those what love you? You let them down? You say, ‘Oh sorry, I ees not used to fight, I just trained to move hips, good luck.’” Alps growled savagely at that. Reika’s taunting had kept him moving all morning, but it was now beginning to try his patience. The mudcaked wolf hurled a blob of mud at Reika, and laughed as it caught her right on the side of the head, the girl having at least turned to not take

it in the face. She stood there silent a moment, and Alps stopped laughing, immediately realizing he'd angered her. For that moment though, he felt grimly satisfied that she was wearing mud on her face for what she'd said. He'd die for his friends, and she ought to already know it. Reika wiped the excess mud off, leaving her fur rather caked in it. She murmured calmly,

"You ees not knowing how to fight. Your life ees dangerous. You should learn. Ball of mud ees not stopping twenty Uruk pigs from taking you apart." Alps looked at her sternly.

"I was learning how to fight from Nidaja, the general of the Amanian Defense Forces, before you kidnapped me, so who's fault is that going to be?" the wolf growled.

"Nidaja? Her stink still all over you when first found you. She not teach you to real fight." The hyena spat.

"Bone or not, you speak ill of her again, and only one of us is making it home." Alps growled threateningly. "Nidaja is a great fighter, and she will teach me everything I can learn." Reika plodded down into the mud again, slopping through it up to her shins as she walked to Alps, poking him in the chest with Bone.

"Reika ees meaning you and Nidaja is lovers. You stink of her love, slave. Lovers not teach you to fight." she barked.

"She teaches me because she loves me." the slave grumbled, pushing Bone aside.

"But does she hurt you?" Reika asked.

"When training? Hell yeah it hurts sometimes. I have had more bruises from training with her than any time I can remember." he stated flatly.

"Broken bones?" Reika asked.

"What?" Alps asked in reply.

"Ees she break wulf bones?" the hyena clarified.

"No, she doesn't want to injure me." He asked, and then gritted his teeth, already realizing where Reika was going with this.

"If slave ees not blocking he blows, if he ees tired and just stands there, too much tired to move, does Nidaja hit him again?" the hyena asked.

“No, she doesn’t.” Alps said softly, thinking about it a little more. It was true. He knew without a shadow of a doubt that Nidaja would never really injure him. She’d never knowingly, willingly break his bones and make him suffer more than bruises at her hand. And it was with this knowledge that Alps understood what Reika meant. “Nidaja... would not hurt me. Not really.”

“In fights, wulfs gets hurt. Wulfs maybe dying. A real teacher what teaches you to fight ees nearly killing. You ees get good at fighting, or you ees getting broken. If Nidaja ees not doing this, then slave ees not able to protect eef Nidaja ees hurt. Slave watches general and queen die because he ees to soft and too weak. You get stronger. Complain less, hate Reika more, and make it to Asuna home faster.” the hyena girl growled.

Alps plodded along again behind her, growling as he hauled himself out of the muck. He didn’t hate Reika, he was actually finding himself respecting her, despite her obvious insanity. She was a real fighter, regardless of mental condition, and she was a very successful survivor. The wolf admitted to himself that the Asuna was right. He was soft. He wasn’t learning how to defend himself in a life or death battle with Nidaja, only how to play with sticks. It might give him more advantage than no training at all, but if he were ever to be able to really protect himself, or others, he’d have to learn from someone who was not afraid to hurt him. He’d need to practice with someone who could kill him. The lupine looked up to Reika as he huffed and thumped along behind her.

“Will you train me?” he asked with a reverent tone.

“No.” came her reply.

“Why not?” the lupine asked.

“Reika ees having to get wulf to empress alive.” Alps gritted his teeth at that, and continued to walk in silence.



## Sirius, Book III

### The Essence

*Comments or Questions?*

Contact Alps: [sarsis@gmail.com](mailto:sarsis@gmail.com)

Or just drop a note at: <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/sarsis/>

## Chapter 10

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"I really am not comfortable with this." The white lupine murmured as the rope bit into his wrists. This time, he really was being tied up. It wasn't a fake the way it had been when Nidaja and Neit were trying to use him as bait to lure out the hyenas. Reika pulled the ropes still tighter.

"You is not having a choice, wulf. Is for safety of you and for people in this village." She stated. Alps sighed softly, shaking his head, relenting. He did not want to get that bone club to the side of his head again. The white lupine strode forward, up to the wood-slatted gate. The entire fairly small village was surrounded by an outward jutting palisade that made just hopping over the wall remarkably dangerous. Reika spoke again, "You is keeping head down, and not speaking to anyone. You is never commenting on sign of weakness or you die. You see sneeze, pretend it not happen. You see broken leg, look at *other* leg. Understand?" Alps nodded to that. "Asuna is not taking prisoners typically, so is needing to speak with village elder about purpose here. Is only staying long enough to get supplies." Reika's captive looked around the village. In this location, there was not even scrubland. It was cracked dried mud and rocks as far in either direction as the hilly landscape allowed him to see.

"Where do *they* get supplies though?" he asked. Reika looked up and murmured softly,

"They is getting supplies brought to them. Outer villages produce clay for the Uruk. Or mine crystal. Is not producing anything else but that, and more Asuna." Reika said. Alps flicked his ears at that. It was hard while walking all this time with the very strong and dominant Reika for him to openly consider the fact that she, and every single one of the Asuna, were actually slaves to Mannus. He hung his head, pondering that fact while the gate was pulled open.

Alps listened to some of the guttural tongue that the Asuna used to speak back and forth as Reika seemed to argue with a gate keeper, who pointed at the ground vehemently a few times, before storming off. Reika walked to the exact location he was pointing, pulling Alps along.

"Wants us to wait here, huh?" he asked.

“Bone says you is learning to speak Asuna good.” Reika said, marveling.

“No... No I’m not.” Alps noted, rolling his eyes a little. It was just a very obvious threatening gesture. After a short while, the wiry gate guard came back with an older-looking male Asuna. He yammered some things to Reika, and she nodded a few times.

“They is needing to lock you in safe place so other Asuna do not kill you while I speak with Elder Kiranna. You go with them. No dying.” Reika stated. Alps whimpered a bit as the older, grizzled male took his rope and jerked him fairly hard. He fell into step behind him. What was going to stop them from killing him the moment he got away from Reika? Surely she’d have thought about that. She was certainly crazy but she wasn’t foolish, was she?

After a few moments of walking down a couple dusty alleyways between short, squat, closely huddled wooden structures, Alps was brought to a stone building. The thing was held together with mud-mortar and an internal structure apparently of wrought iron. It was as close to a jail as this place had. A very heavy wooden door was pulled open, and Alps was pitched into it. The door slammed shut behind him, and he sat with a soft thump in the very fine dust that was an overly dried dirt floor of this obvious storage room. The walls were squat but thick and solid, perhaps to protect whatever was normally stored in here from the elements. For the moment, the only thing really stored there was him. It was musty and rather dark, but quite secure. The white lupine realized perfectly well that he was not being imprisoned as much as protected. His presence here would not be seen as a blessing.

“Well, this is a great mess to be caught up in.” he stated, crossing his arms as he sighed heavily. He then looked down at his mud-caked legs and grumbled, softly picking clumps of mud out of his fur. “I had forgotten what it was like to be absolutely filthy,” he mused.

“Why haven’t you escaped?” came a familiar gentle but seldom heard voice. Alps’ head jerked up, his eyes wide. He looked directly beside him.

There, in her black and silver robes, was the mysterious fox he’d taken from the Shadowfall. Alps backpedaled a bit and shook his head, “Oh come on, How? How are you even *in* here?!”

“That is what I wanted to ask you.” The fox stated.

“I’m abducted. I have trouble believing they got you too.” The white slave replied.

“Certainly not.” She stated icily.

“Is this another dream? I would like to wake up now.” Alps huffed. “This is not fun.”

“Not this time,” the vixen said, looking away from Alps, at the more or less blank wall. Alps hung his arms a bit limply. She was utterly impossible to understand. It was sometimes infuriating.

“Can you get me out?” he asked. There was a long pause before she turned and looked into his eyes. Despite being a bloodline known for being smaller in stature, she was at least as tall as Alps.

“You rescued Letai priestesses from something a lot more substantial than a storage room. This can’t hold you.” Her words were so calm and serene. It was as if she were giving a lecture or a lesson on something exceedingly boring that Alps should have picked up months ago. He wrinkled his nose. He had no idea how she got caught before him or why he had not noticed she was in the room when he was initially thrown in here, but her attitude was not helping him think out his predicament.

“It’s not as simple as that. If I run...” he thought about it a minute. They’d try to recapture him, but what was worse was that he knew what Reika had said was true. He could not go back, even if he did escape.

“Are you afraid of dying?” the dark-furred vulpine asked, her long, silver hair down over her equally silver, blank eyes.

“No, I am afraid of getting others hurt.” Alps crossed his arms, not liking the direction of her questioning. She seemed to have a knack for asking questions in such a way as to make him think about something that only complicated things further.

“You would never hurt your friends.” Her tone remained unwavering as she faced away from him, as if just staring a hole through the wall, her hands clasped in front of her, relaxed. She seemed so calm for being stuck in a storage building.

Alps gritted his teeth and barked out with more than a little irritation, “Of course not, but Mannus *will*!” he slapped the side of the wall. Grit fell from the mud-caked ceiling. There was another staggering pause from the vixen. She turned and looked at Alps.

“Will he fail to hurt them if you don’t come back?” she asked.

“I just don’t want to be what causes him to-“

The fox cut him off. "But in the end, whether it's someone they love who dies, or the pressure of leading a hopeless cause, they will be hurt, won't they?" the vulpine lady asked coldly, looking at Alps with a more serious expression. He backed up a bit.

"That's the ugly reality behind all of this. You know that. You were stuck in the Shadowfall too. There's not an 'up' side here." Alps tried to explain things as carefully and calmly as possible, but being made to think about how hopeless all his options were was not helping him retain his composure.

"So stop him." The reply seemed so completely arbitrary and sensible if it were not for who she was talking about. The slave just gaped in the semi-darkness, only a little light filtering in through the slats near the ceiling. Alps turned away from her in near disgust. Now she was just making fun of him!

"Why don't you?" the wolf asked.

"I don't have a dozen lovers to protect." Alps gritted his teeth. He could not tell if that was meant to be insulting or not. He spoke, still facing away from her, now holding his temples which he found himself more reliant on doing every time he spoke with the usually quiet and enigmatic fox.

"Since you seem to have the answers, how am I supposed to stop him, if you don't mind my insatiable curiosity on the matter?" he asked with a long, slow sigh.

"Why are you here?" she asked again.

Alps rolled his eyes. "You don't like answering questions, do you?"

She stated again, "You don't have to stay." The slave growled softly.

"I'm here because I am being kidnapped by the Asuna, and if I leave, Mannus will kill my friends!" His voice was something of a hiss as he didn't want to shout and draw unwanted attention.

"The Asuna are in far more danger than Nita and Nidaja ever were. If they keep you, Mannus and the Amani both will crush them. Do you want the Asuna to die that badly?" the dark vixen asked. Alps scoffed and looked back at her. How could she even ask that? She didn't know him well, but she should have known he'd not want anyone to be hurt because of him.

"I don't want anyone to die, that's a terrible thing to suggest." The male clenched his fists a little, truly perturbed, but his mind was racing. What was she trying to get him to think about? Was she just crazy?

“Then what do you want from the Asuna?” Her words were once again calm, cold, and collected.

“What *would* I want from them? They are savages. They don’t have anything I want.” Alps turned again, putting his hands against the wall. He was lying. He realized it the moment the words left his lips.

“But they do have something you want. They have an answer to a question your friends can’t answer.” Alps closed his eyes, teeth gritted, hands pressed to the warm earthen wall of the not-very-spacious building. The vulpine was right, of course. He’d been asking himself since Reika made him realize that he was a danger to Nita and Nidaja and everyone else he loved.

“What... makes me so dangerous...?” he asked, looking down at his feet, wanting to just hear her say it. Surely she knew the answer, if she was guiding him so expertly to ask himself.

“That is why you do not run from them.” Her voice was neither congratulatory nor pleased. It was as if just a fact. His own thought, telling him what he said was true. Alps already knew that though.

“You aren’t here to get me out of here.” Alps stated this clearly, knowing it to be the case. She’d have not wasted his time with such interrogation if she were here to release him. He could not help but feel that she was after something bigger than even he was directly involved with. Her answer to his question did not surprise him, neither in its assurance or it’s monosyllabic simplicity.

“No.”

“Then why are you still here?” Alps finally asked before looking up and turning around.

And he was alone. There was not so much as a scent of the vixen in the room. Alps thumped his back against the wall, looking at the ceiling, onto the earthen floor, and everywhere in the simple, square room. She had to have been there. He was not going insane was he? That was no better than Reika talking to Bone!

Alps didn’t have long to chastise himself for his apparent madness, however. The door swung open, Reika plodding through, followed by a much older-looking Asuna. Alps looked up at her. She was tall and lean in comparison to the very sturdily built Reika. She looked as ‘savage’ as Reika, her hair dark with silver streaks pulled back and bound in tight but thick braids bound with what appeared to be large crossed canine teeth. She wore a long, dusty-grey robe. The older Asuna looked at the prisoner for a little while, head tilting up and down

for a bit as she seemed to study him. This made the slave uncomfortable, and he murmured softly,

“I’m not normally this filthy.” Alps closed his eyes, feeling a bit silly for even saying it. But he did feel like she was appraising him based on appearance alone. There was a long pause before Reika finally spoke.

“You is needing Reika to be taking him away? Sorry for being trouble. I have my supplies and can continue to Puranasse.” She stated. Alps didn’t know the place names of any of the Asuna villages so he had no idea where that would be. The older female stood there quiet, gazing at Alps a little longer before saying softly,

“No, Reika... that won’t be necessary just yet. I need to talk to him a moment. Close the door.” Alps looked back to Reika, who did as asked, shutting out what appeared to be the older female’s guards. Alps was glad, as they were rather imposing male Asuna with jet black, very heavily spiked hair. They would look angry and dangerous quietly munching on cake. The white lupine looked back to the older female. She seemed to have a much better command of the common tongue than the younger Asuna.

“Is private now. You is needing Reika to go?” she asked.

“No, that’s fine, Reika, you should be here for this too. It’s better that you are.” Alps was impressed with how refined and elegant this older Asuna sounded. She seemed to be perhaps just a little older than Misty, and in some ways appearing just as wise.

“You speak Amanian well,” the wolf rumbled softly.

“Long ago, I was entrusted to gather information about encroaching settlements from your kind. I dealt a lot with trappers and traders. That started long before I was even your age, and continues from time to time even now. Information is an important tool even to simpler folk.”

“Did Reika tell you why the Asuna needed me?” Alps asked calmly. The aggravation he felt from the Asuna was actually a little less than the frustration he felt from his unexplained visions of the fox. This, in comparison, was a meaningless interview.

“Yes, she explained.” Alps had not expected her to answer that way.

“She wasn’t interested in explaining to me. I think she doesn’t like me. Would you be so kind as to explain what the Asuna want with me? You are a lot better off not being caught with me if you know what I am.” The wolf stated. That pang of his conscience reminded him about what the dark vulpine had said. The

real reason he wasn't escaping from the Asuna. They knew. And he had to know too.

"I was aware before you got here. There are a few who Rios can trust. And there is a reason that this was Reika's supply stop. Originally it was just a safe house to keep you until you recovered from your injuries," she explained. Alps looked at her blankly.

"I'm not injured," the wolf stated plainly. The older female looked at Reika and then at Alps and smiled warmly. It was a rather distressing expression from her given the seriousness of his situation. It was an almost condescending smile like Chana used to get when Alps was little and tried to talk about something he didn't have a clue about. Alps blushed a bit, feeling stupid for some reason just at that expression.

"You were an easier target than we'd have assumed, Alps. You were not supposed to just walk with Reika, we expected you to fight tooth and nail, and you were supposed to be brought here half dead and then be sent with a larger compliment of enforcers." The explanation made perfect sense, and reminded Alps of the danger he was actually in. Alps sank a little, leaning back against the wall.

"So Rios trusts you?" he asks. Reika jabbed him in the stomach with Bone. He huffed, croaking a bit from the belly-blow and doubling over.

"Males call her Empress or Lady Dominis, " Reika's elder stated. "Whether they are Amanian or not." Alps nodded a little as he inhaled, trying to ignore the soreness of his tummy. It should not have been so hard to forget the younger girl's violent nature. "But to answer your question, " the older lady continued, "You are right, she does. You don't need to know her plans for you, suffice it to say, if you continue to cooperate with us as you have been, you will continue not to need to stop to recover."

"What's your name, then?" Alps asked as he looked at Reika and then back to the older lady.

"Lady Kiranna, " she stated calmly. "Am I to believe that you are still a bit confused about what exactly you are?" she asked him. Alps sighed softly. It was the right direction for the conversation, but he still felt very uncomfortable with that possibility. The Letai were legends. He was a slave. Alps closed his eyes and answered.

"I know what Reika says I am. I don't want it to be true. It means I can't go home." There was a long silence as Kiranna watched him speculatively. It was a little comforting that she was less violent than Alps had begun to assume the Asuna as a rule were.

“So she explained the risk you posed?” she asked, putting a hand on Alps’ shoulder. Reika leaned against the wall.

“If it’s true.” Alps looked up at the lady and gritted his teeth.

“It’s good that you understand, “ she added, “but Reika should not have told you that, as taking away a prisoner’s will is not entirely beneficial to ensuring his survival. Reika, you should have bound his hands so he doesn’t –“

“I won’t.” Alps answer was very affirmative. He’d promised Nita after the day he’d first met her. He’d never intentionally hurt himself. He was bound by his promise.

“Well, since you have been through so much, I think I should tell you, if Reika hasn’t already spilled the beans, “ Kiranna explained, “The Asuna are not willing participants to our part in the ugly history that your people have endured.” Alps perked his ears, lifting his head a little. This was not the direction he expected it to go.

“A rebellion?” he asked curiously in a hushed tone. “You are defying your empress’ orders?” Were they going to release him?

“Hardly.” The reply from Kiranna was icy. “The dark one’s control over us must come to an end. We slave in his mines and war with your people. If the Letai are returning, even just one of you, then it’s the only chance we will ever have to break free and control our own destiny. There are less than half the Asuna than there were a hundred years ago. More of us die with rock in our hands than with progeny to our name.” Alps’ eyes widened. He had not realized that such a movement was occurring within the Asuna. And to think that it was at the very top of their empire. Alps pushed his rump against the wall to make sure that no one saw his tail wag. If Nita knew, it would be extremely important and positive news. An end to that conflict was a valuable asset to the defense of the border towns. He then stifled his emotional rise, thinking it out carefully.

“You are not... in a good position to push Mannus back.” Alps was still being very secretive and soft spoken. Kiranna nodded at that and half-whispered back,

“It’s true, but it won’t all happen at once. Rios has plans. It might not even happen in our lifetime. But she said the dawn is upon us.” The older lady seemed very sure. Alps felt that the conversation should have been a little familiar.

“I will do whatever I can to make this end of conflict between our people a reality, save for betraying my love.” Kiranna perked a bit as Alps said this.



“Your love?” she asked. Alps smiled a bit, not minding talking about it. It was forever his reason to stay strong.

“Nita Razelle.” His words were proud.

“The queen?” Kiranna asked. “The slaves have love for their queen?”

“We were to be married before I was filched,” the wolf stated, “hopefully this is only temporarily delayed.” Kiranna seemed to wilt a bit.

“That complicates things a bit.” Alps nodded to that also. Reika nodded as well. There was a short pause before Kiranna spoke again. “No matter, it won’t change Rios’ mind, that I’m sure. She has no other choice. That is, if you are really Letai.” Those words were whispered more softly than the others.

“There’s not any way to be really sure, though, is there? I mean, it’s all supposition unless you happen to have a written note from my parents saying they were Letai.” Alps felt that he was being a little cheeky, but he was feeling glad that the situation was not actually as dark as he had feared it to be. His kidnapping was not intended as an act of war, it was an act of resistance against the very element that had forced the conflict. He would find out as much as he could about it before being returned, he hoped, and be able to give very good tidings to his beloved.

“There is actually, but it might embarrass you,” she replied. Alps tilted his head curiously, and she continued. “If I ask something, would you answer the question no matter how odd or personal?” Kiranna asked. The wolf blinked at that. He didn’t have any odd birth marks or fur patterns in intimate places so he could not imagine what kind of question it might be. He shrugged and answered softly,

“Sure. It’s not like I can hide much on my little trip anyway.” Kiranna nodded at that and leaned back, crossing her arms.

“Do you like physical pleasure?” The elder’s question took Alps completely by surprise. He looked at her to see if she had a teasing expression, but she was serious.

“That doesn’t prove anything. Even slinks like to be petted, Lady Kiranna.” He crossed his arms too, feeling a little embarrassed, just as she had warned.

“I don’t mean for yourself, Alps. How do you feel about other people who are feeling it? Do you like being near people when they are happy? When they feel good?” she asked. Alps quirked a brow.

“That still doesn’t prove much. Most people like to be around others who are happy.” Alps could not quite figure out where the wizened Asuna was going with this.

“But not you, Alps. It’s more than that for you, isn’t it?” Kiranna asked in a near whisper, leaning closer. Alps looked down. More than that? He thought about it a moment. How did he feel when he watched Uri and Misha play their bedroom games? He didn’t always get to play with them, but he loved it anyway. It felt...

“Exhilarating...” Alps said softly.

“You feel full of energy and life, don’t you?” Kiranna asked.

“It makes me happy. Being happy is the same as feeling full of life.” He said. As far as he knew, everyone felt energetic and healthy if they were happy. Alps looked up at the slight part in the ceiling that kept the storage room from overheating. He waved Kiranna’s explanation away as easily disputed.

“But for you it was so much more, because... when you found yourself surrounded by these people who you brought pleasure to, you noticed that you had a very strange effect on others. Particularly females. Inexplicably, they want to be close to you. They long for you even though you are a slave, without question.” Alps widened his eyes, his heart sinking. That was a little more distinctive, and the explanation of his own internal question about his effect on others coming from her without provocation was outright eerie.

“That... seems to happen a bit. But I mean... Not until just recently.”

“But it’s been the rule since you have found your own happiness and contentment, hasn’t it?” she asked.

“Yes. But Nita really does love me. It’s not just some weird effect of being Letai.” Alps stated solidly.

“I am sure she does, but you have a very potent ability to make her happy, just in being near. Her love is genuine but her happiness is enhanced. Nothing is wrong with that.” Kiranna smiled at the wolf. It felt a lot more genuine. He did not feel like smiling back.

“How does this prove anything? Why would it mean I am Letai?” he asked with a bit of a frantic tone. He hadn’t expected they could prove it.

“Alps, do you even know where the Letai get their power?” Kiranna asked incredulously. It seemed like Letai lore was a normal topic of discussion for the Asuna. The wolf felt envious. He could hardly get strait answers about them

from Misty, aside from the fact that she was fond of them, and was the authority on them in Diera.

"No. I'm a slave. I don't really have much in the way of reading time." He explained.

"This take time." Reika stated, and sat casually on the floor of the storage room. Alps wondered what the guards outside must have thought was happening. It had already been a while.

"Would you like me to explain it to you?" Kiranna asked.

"Yes." Alps answered monosyllabically. At last. Someone with answers. The wolf didn't even care if they were the right ones or the ones he wanted to hear. At least if he understood some of this, he'd know what made him a target. The fox had been completely right. Kiranna nodded downward, indicating that Alps should sit, and she sat on the dirt floor in front of him.

"Close your eyes Alps. I need you to try to envision the things I say. It helps." she stated.

"Alright," the wolf answered, crossing his legs and sitting in front of the older lady hyena. He closed his eyes, which was, in truth, a little comforting. It was easy to forget he was a captive and was being "interrogated" by the enemy when all he could hear was a gentle feminine voice. At least he felt certain that his odd effect on others was limited to his friends, since he'd not been remotely happy since being kidnapped.

"First, I want you to forget what you know about being alive, and whatever you learned about the world around you." Kiranna said. Alps inwardly rolled his eyes. Sure, that would be easy. But he didn't say anything. "Imagine yourself as a little lump of clay, wet and soft, in the shape of a funny white wolf-boy who's not had the best couple of days." This got a chuckle out of Alps. That seemed to please the hyena, who seemed to have a good tone for a teacher. The slave could not help but pay very close attention. She continued. "Now, this little lump of unhappy clay doesn't live on a rock. He doesn't live in a tree. His home, like every little lump of wet clay, is in the bed of a mighty, endless river. The river doesn't move fast, it moves actually very slow. Can you see the river, Alps?" she asked. The wolf calmly replied that he could see it in his mind. At least, he could imagine it.

Alps felt the presence of Reika beside him. She sat close, like a sister might sit by her sibling when grandmother tells a story. This made Alps blush a little as well. He had not considered the remotest possibility that he'd become close to or comfortable with the Asuna. It had been the furthest thing from his mind. Kiranna spoke again. "As the river moves, the clay wears away. You've

seen that in the bed of streams before, haven't you? The bands of orange or blue from the clay in the bottom of the river as the motion of the water wears it away?" she asked.

"Yes, I know. I can see it," the wolf whispered. Reika said that she could as well. Alps actually felt incredibly relaxed now, which was a nice change. He found himself wishing he could sleep a little before heading back out. It was easy to forget he was tired when he feared for his life.

"What becomes of the clay when it's gone?" Kiranna asked.

"The little white wolf boy is dead." Reika said flatly, sending a chill up Alps' spine, both because of how easy it was for her to say, and because he assumed the same thing. The slave nodded, though.

"Yes, but not quite. Where is the clay?"

"Miles downstream, I guess." Alps said softly.

"In the water." Reika added.

"Right. So the wolf isn't dead. He's a part of the stream. With all the other wolves and hyenas and birds and beasts. And eventually, there will be more lumps of clay, and what once was his will be part of them as the stream deposits it against the banks along the way." Alps nodded to her explanation. He'd thought he heard a story kind of like that from people traveling in Seravi when he was an orphan there.

"So the river is time." Alps asked, assuming that's what the imagery was supposed to be.

"No, the flow of the river is time. What makes it move. The river is just reality." Alps thought about it a bit, Reika thinking in silence as well. The wolf wondered what the nutty hyena's mind was making of all of that.

"So, what is the clay? Is there any way to keep the river from pulling it away?" he asked. He felt this was an important part of the lesson because Misty had stated that Letai lived much longer lives than the regular Amanians.

"That's very astute, Alps," said Kiranna, "Yes, there is, and that is the very basis of the Letai's power." Alps smiled. He thought so. Kiranna continued to explain. "You see, the Letai can see and feel that clay being pulled away from people, but only if it's under the right conditions. And if they can see and feel it, they can pull it toward them. Think about it. Their clay would gather that band of clay that the river pulls from others. It eventually becomes a part of all living things anyway, but the Letai can choose to take it now. And they don't have to

make it a part of themselves immediately. They can “muddy” the water, changing the world around them a bit with that clay. They can cast spells that let them heal, or can even do terrible things, if they so choose. Mannus himself was once Letai, and his incredible ability to draw this energy, these bands of clay... gave him the ability to raise his armies of real clay, mixed with blood and crystal for control.” Alps gritted his teeth. Just pulling energy that had already left other people could make someone that powerful? He could never imagine pulling that kind of energy himself. Then his ears flattened as he thought of something.

“What conditions have to exist before they can pull the energy to themselves?” He felt a sense of dread as a few of the pieces fell together loudly in his head.

“The Letai are able to draw energy that comes from those around them when they are feeling very powerful positive emotions. Laughter, joy, pleasure... All these things make that clay almost magnetic to them. The more positive, the more they can draw at once, and the more positive energy they draw, the easier it becomes to draw from others, so long as they are experiencing intensely positive emotions.” The explanation was exactly what Alps had expected and desperately feared the moment the idea fluttered into his head.

“Can they draw it and not even be aware?” he asked finally, actually dreading the answer. Had he been drawing the energy of his friends all along? Could it possibly harm them or would they be upset if they knew?

“It’s possible, but it’s very rare. However, given the rumor that you were forced into the Shadowfall, and then broke out, I would say you took some very powerful positive energy in there with you, or you found a lot of it while you were there.” Alps’ ears rang from how much of a rush of truth lay in those words. He became stronger in the Shadowfall as he brought pleasure to Luna and Ceriss. They felt a shock of joy boiled from years of isolation and hopelessness and his positive energy he’d already drawn before that was a scent they could not refuse, longing for the pleasure of his touch immediately. After they had enjoyed the pleasure of his company upon their bodies, their joy didn’t even begin to falter because of the hope he gave them. When the moment came to task, he drew upon their energy completely, and with it, broke out of the Shadowfall. There was finally an answer, but it was one that meant Reika was right. He absolutely had to be Letai.

“Then if I am drawing that energy from those around me I could get stronger?” he asked.

“Absolutely. But carrying the joy of those you love so close leaves you to carry their worries and their fears as well. You won’t let them suffer, and that means that you will take incredible risks for them. This is what we had feared. Mannus used that against the Letai. They’d never let harm come to the

Amanians over their existence, and they stood against him one by one only to be cast into eternal suffering. Rios did not want you to be destroyed like that before she could get to you. Before you could make a difference for the Asuna.” she added.

“What am I supposed to do to make a difference?” Alps asked, finally opening his eyes. He felt light headed.

“I cannot tell you that myself. I know the reason, but I don’t know her method. You will play a part, but I cannot say just how. Rios knows more. You need to go with Reika to the mountain village of Puranasse. You will find your answers there.” Kiranna got up onto her feet, holding her back a little.

“Kiranna...” Alps said softly, getting up as well. Reika stayed on her rump, holding her knees, looking happily up at her elder. There seemed to be a lot of respect there. The slave looked back to her and said, “Who can teach me to use the essence? Will Ri – Lady Dominis... Will she be able to teach me?” he asked, wanting to know if there would be more answers than just what the Asuna wanted with him where he was going. If he was to protect his friends, he would need to become stronger. He had been taken from them so easily, but if he made the most of this event, it might never have to happen again.

“She will be able to show you more than any Amanian could ever dream,” was Kiranna’s reply, making Alps’ chest rise with a deep breath. That was most certainly a lofty and appealing possibility. Despite knowing the danger he’d be in, Alps only steeled his resolve about following through. Perhaps the black vixen was right, and he could have escaped long ago. He might have actually even been able to overpower Reika a few times and kill her to secure his freedom, but there was something a lot stronger than a crazy Asuna with a bone-club forcing him along now. He would have to see this through.

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The morning light greeted Nidaja a bit harshly. The rains had stopped, which was a good thing to enable her and Lyat to catch up to Reika and Alps, but the resulting sunshine glistened off of everything, high and bright in a cloudless sky. Nidaja ducked back into the cave. Lyat was finishing the drying of their rain-soaked clothing. Nidaja was already dressed, but the canvas-style clothing that the hyena wore, particularly his traveling cloak, was a little more difficult to dry. Nidaja sat back down beside him. The general looked to the large, strong Asuna, his fur looking soft and dusty even as wet as he’d been the night before.

“We should have gotten up a bit earlier, but I was... so comfortable.” The green-furred lupine had a very guilty tone to her voice. The large male fretted with his bouncy spiked hair a little and looked to the wolf with a wry smile.

“You had reason to be. You slept on me. I couldn’t move an inch. My back ees killing me.” He stated in his usual accent. One that Nidaja was finding herself somewhat endeared to. Had it been true? Did giving up her anger toward the Asuna make that much of a difference on her? Surely if the Asuna and Amani could find common ground it would make a long term difference. She could not help thinking about that a lot as she got ready in the unusually bright morning. Nidaja looked up and down the spotted, naked hyena still sitting there.

“You don’t complain enough for me to know.” The general barked playfully, looping an arm in between his thighs, hugging one of those thighs against her side. Lyat chuckled to that, and shook his head.

“Lyat ees not likely to be complaining about that, no. Lyat ees needing eh sleep last night too, not moving much even without wulf girl on heem.” There was a soft lean of his body against hers, and Nidaja’s ears flitted back a little. She inhaled a bit, drawing in that hot, musky male scent. Alps, for as wonderful as he was with her body, and how attentive he was to her needs, and those of his other friends and his beloved, was not physically strong, and Lyat was, which was something that Nidaja tended to look for a lot more in her lovers before Alps. Given that he would be marrying the general’s sister, she didn’t feel guilty about the previous night at all. And less guilty about what played through her mind at that moment.

“Another ten minutes before your clothes are dry, huh?” Nidaja said with a smirk. Her hand slipped up between Lyat’s thighs, making him jump a little.

“Daahj...” he panted out, already shortening her name to something of an affectionate pet name. “Lyat is not keeping up with fast-footed Amani general if she ees relentless before Asuna is even on his feet!” His words were in protest, but as the general’s strong but gentle hand wrapped around the very generous helping of Asuna masculinity, it didn’t have anything negative to report, throbbing to life immediately. Nidaja leaned comfortably against his side, slowly moving her hand up and down his thickening length.

“We can’t go anywhere for ten minutes, let me see if that’s... enough... time...” her hand cupped at the slightly thicker tip of his lengthening flesh. She twisted softly, crooning as she got a bit of wetness from him finally, without a minute or so of gentle but skillful work.

“Ees enough time.. if you ees not stopping...” Lyat rumbled, putting his hands back a little to prop himself up, tightening his legs a little. “You ees nice wulf for liking Lyat’s pleasure, but ees making a mess if you ees going on –

unnnh-..." his rounded ears folded back, his expression tightening into pleasure. This delighted the thankful wolf female. Nidaja's intentions were to get Alps back from the Asuna and bring the source of her sister's happiness home, but if she could also build a closer friendship with the Asuna, it could relieve a lot of the tension her sister had over their part in the overall conflict. Nidaja would not lose out on that kind of opportunity, especially when she found herself rather enjoying the feel of that hardening flesh in her hand, twitching and pulsing with life as her Asuna companion leaned back a little more, his hips lifting off the edge of the rock ledge he'd been sitting on. Nidaja looked into his lap at the length she fondled and stroked in her capable hands. Used to holding a sword, she found it equally suited to being tender in just the right ways for Lyat.

"It's alright, Lyat... You can make a mess. I want to see it." The general focused her attention on his flaring tip, wet with pre now, so easy to manipulate. The wolf female folded her ears back with a bit of playful determination. The spotted male huffed softly, clutching the edge of the ledge and pushing his hips back and forth slowly, rolling them as Nidaja paid close attention to just the tip of that throbbing shaft. She moved her other hand, finally, down beneath his sack, holding it, cupping it softly, letting her gentle hand undulate underneath it, working to get the tide of his lust boiling over.

Nidaja leaned forward a bit more, letting her head rest against Lyat's chest as she angled his cock upward a little, slipping her hand up and down over it methodically, and a little more briskly. He huffed a little louder in pleasure as she seemed to work him at exactly the right speed to provoke his need only more and more. His hips lurched and rolled desperately for what Nidaja was giving him. This made the general grin in spite of herself, simply for the sense of control it gave her over this powerful warrior who she knew could probably best her in battle. Strong and formidable though he may be, he'd be having trouble walking out of here because of her, and she'd see his essence spilled all over the floor of this cave in mere minutes. This made her pant softly as well.

"Nnuf... Daaj... Ees getting closer... F-Faster... not slowing down... Unnk!" he bowed his head. The wolf female barked back to him sharply,

"Yes, Lyat! Now hold still! Let me do it! Let me bring you there with my own hands... Oh good... Good..." she huffed as his hips froze, trembling, muscles bound tight. There were many times that Nidaja brought Alps pleasure just to watch him climax, but this strong male seemed a bit more taboo to do something like that too. It was certainly more so given that he was not even the same species, but at that point, Nidaja had already ceased to care.

The general brought her hands together, cupping them over his tip and wringing them together wetly with his copious pre, and seconds later both hands felt a surge of heat, and overflowed. The general crooned loudly with encouragement as she flattened her hands and began to stroke his pulsing,



throbbing cock between them wetly and vigorously, watching with sheer delight as thick, heavy streamers of hyena seed arced from his throbbing shaft. He sank down a bit, hips suddenly lurching uncontrollably again, reminding the general very much of what it was like to feel him pushing into her. She held her hands still for a little to let him pump, his shaking muscles and bristling fur a nice reminder of the pleasure he was suffering through because of the green-furred beauty. After a few short moments of this potent and wet display, Nidaja released him, and leaned back again, panting lightly as well.

“Nidaja... ees not regretting last night, Lyat ees thinking.” He huffed, looking down at his pulsing, bouncing dark shaft. The general shook her head softly.

“No, not at all.” The general’s reply was casual and serene as she looked at her hand, ribbons of cream hanging thickly between her fingers. Lyat was right, hyenas weren’t very tidy where their climaxes were concerned. The lady wolf was glad though. It was exactly what she wanted to see. It was a short, depraved little thing to do, but it felt right somehow. A perfect use of that ten minutes, probably less, to prove to the hyena that she had given up her negative feelings.

Lyat rested a bit longer, helping Nidaja to dry her hands using the hem of his grey robes. She protested a bit, but he insisted that they had endured worse. The general thought better than to ask for clarification. She wasn’t close enough to him to ask those kinds of questions yet. After getting dressed and having a little bit to eat, the pair made it back onto what passed for a trail to the Asuna.

“We lost a bit of time. Should we worry for Alps’ safety?” Nidaja asked. She knew she’d asked before, but it weighed on her heavily. She’d never forgive herself if stopping to have fun meant suffering for the white lupine she’d grown to adore. Lyat answered softly.

“Wulf ees not in danger if he ees being not murderous to Reika.” He answered. The general thought about that carefully. She just could not imagine Alps trying to hurt someone if there was any other way, but if she made him think he was going to die or worse, there was no telling.

“How about when he gets where he is going?” the green-toned general asked.

“If he ees being agreeable and helping Lady Dominis... he ees maybe finding his stay pleasant, and not at all unhappy.” The spotted male crooned.

“We’re close enough to one another now, you can be honest with me. What does Lady Dominis want from Alps?” Nidaja asked.

“More Letai. Ees obvious, yur?” he churred happily, his tone soothing.

“Well, Alps can certainly provide that...” Nidaja stated. “Do you have many Shadowfall crystals?” she asked, curious to know what kind of force Alps might release given the chance.

“We ees not allowed to handle them directly. No Shadowfall crystals.”

“How’s she supposed to get Letai with no Shadowfall crystals?” Nidaja asked, plodding along behind him.

“Empress is having other way. It ees just taking longer. And ees less dangerous to your friend.” This idea made Nidaja feel a lot better. She had worried he would be forced back into the Shadowfall, and maybe this time would be unable to get out.

“She won’t hurt him then?” Nidaja asked, once more to be sure.

“Norok..” came his negative reply. “She ees not hurting. Ees so nicely treated that ees making Asuna spots pale with jealousy. You see. He be fine when we get there.” He laughed. Nidaja nodded to that, and plodded along behind the hyena, feeling better about the journey already, and hoping Alps’ days were no less positive.

## Sirius, Book III

### The Essence

*Comments or Questions?*

Contact Alps: [sarsis@gmail.com](mailto:sarsis@gmail.com)

Or just drop a note at: <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/sarsis/>

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## Chapter 11

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Alps slapped his feet along the muddy clearing in a quick side step, panting as he felt the weight of the rain pressing him down as the storm proved just how heavy it could be. Reika launched herself at the white servant wolf, raking her claws at him, an expression of pure fury in her eyes. The lupine pushed himself out of her way with as mighty a leap as he could manage, only barely clearing the ends of those outstretched claws. Shirtless, his white pelt bore patterns of a few crisscrossing lines of pink where blood was being pushed hard out of his fur from the driving rain. The wind whipped the curtains of rain over him like chains pulling him in directions he didn't want to go. Alps' chest heaved heavily in his panting.

"I get it! You are really good at this, but if I just get used as a straw dummy for you to beat on then I'm not learning anything!" The Asuna ignored his complaint and hurled herself with a feral-seeming leap at the lupine again. This time, instead of getting slashing claws, Alps took a crunching, crushing blow to his left shoulder, and it spun him so hard that he actually felt his eyes bulge against their sockets before he splattered into the thick, pasty mud in the middle of the grassless field that Reika had decided would be perfect to "play" in.

"Pain is being good motivator, soft clay wolf thing!" the young hyena barked. Alps rolled instinctively, not feeling like the girl was done with her punishment. He was right, as she seemed to just belly-flop right where he had been. Alps panted as he struggled back onto his feet, his muscles all hurting even though this fight had only lasted a few minutes thus far. They had been sparring off and on for a couple of hours though. The rain had not been nearly so heavy at first, but it seemed like even the threat of being killed by wind and rain and lightning was not enough to discourage Reika from her practice. At first, Alps had been elated when she finally agreed to practice with him, to let him get a little stronger and capable of fighting off an attacker, but it only seemed to become an excuse for Reika to give a self-sanctioned beating to the wolf. Alps felt glad that Chana was never able to hit him that hard.

"Letai aren't made for battle, Reika... we get our ability from something that doesn't involve leaving our opponent in a bloody mess. I don't need to practice getting hit, just getting away from being hit." Alps held his knees, wheezing a little as he panted so hard. With the saturation of the rain, it was almost hard to breathe the air here. "... I will learn other things to protect myself in the future, I bet... when we get where we're going." Alps looked to the east, in the direction of the mountains they were

approaching. They appeared grey and indistinct. It would only be another day, but they still seemed to loom so far away. He'd been seeing them for two days now, rising larger and larger in the distance, bigger and sharper and more vicious-looking than even the mountains that rose over Kishu valley where he buried the gathering Uruk army in snow. Alps paid for looking at the mountains instead of his opponent, however. He felt a blow between his shoulders as Reika kicked him, and he actually somersaulted twice in the mud, getting a very hefty helping of mud for his open jaws as a treat. Alps spat out the mud as best he could, looking up at Reika.

"You is doing better to learn to fight like this!" she barked savagely.

"This is how animals fight, Reika! Surely I can defend myself better if I were shown actual techniques!" Alps flailed a bit, motioning some of the things Nidaja had shown him. Reika kicked her foot suddenly, sending a ball of mud right to Alps' face. He was laid out on his back from the force of it, sputtering more mud from his mouth.

"Letai use frilly fighting like that, yes?" Reika barked. Alps coughed a bit.

"Yes.. pth.. Yes, Letai use frilly fighting, but it's elegant and effective, even against hordes of brutal bandits, I read." The wolf sat up, and dodged another ball of mud. Reika had to be just picking on him at this point.

"And with this fighting, what?" the hyena girl asked.

"What do you mean?" Alps replied with his own question. "They beat back many enemies. They were so well renowned that Mannus knew his only hope of gaining power would be to eliminate them first. That's a pretty stout claim to fame, right?" The white lupine got up, wiping mud off his face, thankful that Reika appeared happy to just stand there a moment, getting some of his strength back.

"So, you can show me a standing Letai army who can demonstrate this fighting and teach you?" she asked. Alps flattened his ears, knowing now where Reika was going with that.

"Point taken, but they didn't get made into slaves." Alps narrowed his eyes, making the implication boldly that the Letai would not have been made slaves, and that it was a sign of the difference in fighting ability. He immediately regretted it when he saw the vicious expression take hold of Reika's face. He'd just called her entire species weak, which he was adamantly warned not to do. He gritted his teeth as she approached.

"Wolf... If Reika is wanting to kill you, you not even see it coming. You is weak beyond that of Asuna babies. You defenseless, and yet you insult? You not having warm effect on me wolf. Reika not having problem killing you. Is time for nap." She began to approach Alps with a purposeful glare in her eyes. The white lupine knew what it meant. She was going to beat him unconscious for his transgression.

“Reika, I am sorry, I didn’t mean it that way, I just meant-“ the wolf was cut off by a ball of mud that was slung at his face with a strong kick of the hyena’s foot. He’d been dodging those for half an hour, so he had no trouble dodging that one, backing up slowly as the rain drove down harder as if to illustrate the girl’s rage. Her muddy dark shirt clung to her body in a way that would be attractive if she were not about to render the wolf unconscious. Her trousers were so caked in mud that it was hard to tell if she was even still wearing them. Alps’ trousers were in the same state. It was a very ferocious, brutal looking scene already, he knew, but it just took a turn for the worse!

“You is thinking the Letai is better. They is indestructible, but that is why they is all on inside of crystals, alone forever. That never happen to Asuna, Mannus not even TRY!” she barks. “To be there is giving up life! Life is most dear to Letai and they is rolling over and giving it up! You give up Nita and Nidaja and all your friends when time comes like every other Letai because you think you is better and can’t fall down somehow. You leave entire world to burn and decay because you is so big and important. You love no one but yourselves!” she screamed. Alps gritted his teeth, suddenly furious. There were a lot of things that someone could tell him, calling him weak, or useless, or insignificant, but to say that he would just let his friends be hurt because he was too good to help them was a different kind of attack all together. The wolf balled up his fists.

“Take that back, Reika. You know I would die to protect them!” he barked, baring his teeth.

“Reika is knowing this!” she yapped back, approaching a little faster. “But that all you do! And how is you protecting them if you is dead?!” she hissed, taking a swing at him. The flick of her arm was so fast that, just as promised, Alps could barely even see it. It grazed his cheek, and he felt fur actually pulled out just from her hand passing by him. If that hit him, he’d have likely suffered a broken jaw. Reika meant business this time. Alps backpedaled a little, and then kicked his foot, slinging mud back at Reika as she’d been doing him, with a wet thump of splattering thickness over her tummy and chest, rather than her face, where Alps was aiming.

“What am I supposed to do?!” Alps barked loudly at Reika, backing up more as she smeared the mud off her chest with a scowl. “It’s me against Mannus and his entire army, and against everyone else who is afraid to defy him and lose their life, and I am even fighting against my own desire not to let others get hurt for standing up for me! I need to be able to fight the way the Letai did, one against a hundred if need be. This style will just get me buried!”

“What is outcome of fight then?” Reika said icily, throwing another brutal punch. Alps tried to block it, but it felt like he’d just swung his arm as hard as he could into a tree. He felt the snap, and grabbed his wrist, shouting out. She broke it! She was going to kill him if she hit him directly with one of those. The pain raced up his arm and seemed to well right in his heart, a death-grip of fear suddenly on him. Reika was out of

control. Her promise didn't matter with this kind of rage, Alps was going to die! He screamed back at Reika, trying hard to ignore the searing pain.

"I will die before I let harm come to them! I will die, and there's nothing any of us can do to stop it!" he shouted, holding his wrist, going to his knees. He was weak. He was so weak that even with a broken wrist he could not bear to go on. The pain made him want to scream, wail in utter horror and disbelief. He'd had that arm broken twice before by Reika, and somehow it wasn't this bad.

"Then you die! You not get to live! If you is not wanting to live then you is not able to protect them. Asuna live because even if dangerous, we protect each other, together! We standing united under Rios, the great empress, and we fight to our last breath for her, as we know she fight till last breath for us, even in the face of greatest horrors ever known! Your queen is doing the same for you, and you push it away! You is having so much power in those who protect you, and you is afraid to use it! You is afraid to stand together, and that is why Letai wiped out!" Alps coughed as he felt a foot punch into his chest, cast back on his shoulders, kicked so hard he slid through the mud a good ten feet, his feet actually coming up into the air as he nearly somersaulted. Alps retched, almost vomiting from the pain in his arm and the impact to his chest.

"I can't, Reika! I can't let them die over me, I can't!" he cried, tears streaming from his clenched eyes, the rain blinding him. He rolled onto his side.

"Then your choice assures their death. And your own." She growled, lifting her foot. Alps closed his eyes tightly, knowing what was coming. He only hoped the damage she was about to do would not be permanent. As angry as she seemed, despite her promise, she seemed perfectly capable of killing him. But nothing happened. He looked up, seeing her towering over him, despite the fact that she was nearly a head shorter than him. She had her foot up, gritting her teeth, seeming to struggle with herself as to whether or not to crush his head. Then, through the blinding rain, Alps saw a rapidly approaching shadow, which only showed its shape for a mere second. Reika's bone club came sailing through the rain, and impacted the hyena's head, before falling into the mud by Alps' face, it's crudely drawn-on eyes looking at him in their eerie blank stare, as Reika's eyes rolled back, and the hyena girl came to her knees, then fell over Alps' hips with a soft thump, head in the mud.

The wolf was dumbfounded by that. He didn't see where the club's sailing arc started, and no one could have seen well enough to hit Reika in the head with it if they were not even close enough when they threw it to see their outline in the rain, but it was a dead shot. Alps struggled a bit to get her up, trying to shake her awake or at least keep her from drowning in the mud and rain and muck. His arm still burned like a wildfire from pain.

"Hello?!" the wolf cried out into the rain, but no one answered. No one was there. How had the club struck the girl if no one picked it up? He shook the Asuna again, trying to make her stir. She was sure to be murderous if she thought Alps hit her! She

didn't move. The hyena was breathing normally enough, so she wasn't injured critically. Alps sat in the rain, looking at the bone club. Had he made it move somehow, or had it moved on its own? The wolf shook his head. Neither answer made any sense. Sure, Reika seemed to think the club had a will of its own, but even if it had a personality, it could not have attacked Reika. Alps picked up the weapon, holding it, inspecting it for a bit, before he heard Reika stir finally. He froze. Of all the times for her to finally rouse, it had to be when he was looming over her with the thing that hit her.

"Are you okay?" Alps asked. Reika slapped a hand on the back of her head, curling up into a sitting position. Her eyes were not focused yet, and she seemed dizzy.

"What... What you DO?!" she asked. Alps had no answer to give her, but he realized that if he appeared weak right then, the beating would start over.

"Bone attacked you. Hit you from behind on his own." Alps stated, knowing full well even he could not believe that, and he saw it.

"Give!" Reika said, holding out her hand. Alps handed her the club, and backed up. His arm was in so much pain he felt like he was going to pass out. The rain was beginning to let up.

"We is being alone! No one else here, I would know. Asuna have good senses for that. Open field. No one sneak in close. Bone, is hitting me though, Reika knows what it is feeling like!" she complained. "Bone, why is you doing that?!" she yelled at the club. Alps gritted his teeth. That wasn't a positive direction for the conversation to go. She narrowed her eyes at the club. "Norock! You is hitting Reika, you say someone is throwing you, but no one there. You say is girl, but girl is no where near!" she shouted. Alps looked to the side, suddenly considering something. But to say that brought in other problems. He knew that for whatever reason, the fox was following him, and was not likely far away. She had the ability to move around unseen, coming and going without warning, so she could have done it, but to accept that as a possibility also would mean that Reika really was talking to the bone club, which was as unacceptable as the club attacking her on its own!

"Reika..." Alps said softly, rubbing the back of his own head, his broken arm pulled against his chest.

"No talking!" the hyena growled to the wolf.

"Reika, we should continue. I need to get to ... to Puranasse..." he said, having to think of the name of the place again. Reika shook her head, snapping out of it.

"Yurevanstin..." she growled in the affirmative. She glared at the club a moment longer, and then offered a hand to help Alps up. He gave the good one. The hyena looked at his other arm skeptically. "Is alright? Bruised in fight?" she asked.

"Broken, I'm pretty sure." Alps growled, suddenly irritated that she was unaware she'd even hurt him. He wasn't that fragile.

"Wolfs is made of clay for real. Comes apart too easy. Fix it in Puranasse. We go for now." The hyena began to plod off, the rain barely falling at that point. Alps sloshed through the mud after her.

"Reika..." Alps said again softly.

"What is it, weak wolf?" she asked.

"I'm sorry I insulted your people... For calling them weak, I mean..." he offered.

"Apology is for weak things. Asuna need no apology." The girl walked quietly a few steps and then looked hatefully back at Alps. "Reika is sorry for wolf's arm." The slave flattened his ears, getting the drift. He hung his head, nursing his agonizing arm as he walked behind her. A whole day of walking with this was going to be a nightmare. He felt it in every step he took. He was not sure if he'd even make it all the way there without passing out from the pain. But, he also didn't dare show his weakness again.

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As the rain cleared, Nidaja looked up, sweeping the water from her hair as best she could, the green-tinted mane pulled back in a ponytail tightly behind her to keep it from retaining as much water to spill back into her eyes, a few trails of it still managing to fall down her face as she kept in step behind Lyat. Even with the fact that she was a soldier, and had been traveling in her duties most of her adult life, it was hard to keep up with the very hardy Asuna, who had probably been running and fighting from the day he could move himself around.

The place they approached was in the middle of nowhere, it seemed. A palisade that was erected around it jutted out at painful looking angles, obviously intended to keep things bigger than a lupine or Asuna out. Nidaja wondered what that might be. The emerald Amanian then fell closer in step behind the larger Asuna. There were two other burly-looking males at the gate, and they automatically brought their spears to bear at the sight of Nidaja. One of them growled out,

"Yuruld, stintanockpri." His tone and words seemed somehow darker and more crude than when Lyat spoke his own tongue. He answered the words in similar ones, which Nidaja could not quite follow. The taller of the two males, both dressed in heavy-looking leather and cloth armor, strode forward, bringing his spear to Lyat's throat. Nidaja tensed up, a little surprised as she found herself ready to leap to Lyat's aid. She



already viewed him as a friend, even when a few days before, she hated everything about the Asuna.

“Stay back.” Her hyena friend held his hand up to make sure she didn’t get involved.

“You talking like them! Not allowed!” the shorter of the two barked, and then, both launched themselves at Lyat with their spears. Nidaja had not forgotten what it was like to fight Lyat, but she found out, that moment, that not all of them were trained the way he was. He seemed to just flow around their weapons as they thrust at him simultaneously, and then seized both males by the backs of their necks and slammed their heads together so hard it even hurt Nidaja to witness it!

In that single motion, so perfect and relaxed and efficient, both forms crumpled to the ground. The wolf female looked in awe at Lyat as he seemed to take quick vital signs. He had not intended to kill them, so he did not. After feeling satisfied that they were not dead, he pushed the gates open slowly. Inside, there was a nice welcoming party, all with wooden spears drawn, facing him. He dusted himself off as a form moved through the crowd. An older-looking Asuna female.

“Lyat! What is the meaning of this? Why have you brought an Amanian among us – oh dear heavens!” the older female cried, cupping her charcoal muzzle. “Lyat are you *mad*?!” she cried.

“Lyat is catching up with sister. She is coming through here, yes?” he asked.

“Lyat, that’s General Nidaja Razelle, she’s dangerous, why would you lead her here?!” the older female shouted. The spears bristled even more, all aimed at Lyat, and not the general. They apparently felt that he was more dangerous somehow, which gave her a good idea of what they saw the average Amanian abilities to be.

“I am knowing this. Where is Reika, is being important. Wolf is bad news. Rethinking is maybe necessary.” Lyat explained, looking around as if his sister might be standing in the crowd.

“Reika is pressing on with her objective. It will not be stopped. It is the will of the empress. You know this.” The older female said darkly. Nidaja gritted her teeth. How large was the conspiracy to take him? What did they really want with him? The general looked up to the older female.

“You don’t understand, you are about to start a war!” she barked. “He was intended to marry the queen. This has to stop now! I don’t want war with your people! We have to avoid this!” she shouted.

“I am aware of this. Reika and Alps explained it to me. But they must press on.”

"Alps... He spoke to you?" Nidaja asked, Lyat looking back and forth between them.

"He was awake?" Lyat asked, seeming even more surprised that he was not out cold.

"He was following Reika willingly. There is something he must do. He knows this. He has continued by his own volition." The older female stated. "By the end of the day, they will be in Puranasse. There is nothing you can do to prevent the meeting from taking place."

"What will they do to him?" Nidaja asked, grabbing the hilt of her sword, ready to show her strength if she needed to. She was sick of not knowing what this was about.

"They need his blood." Lyat said softly, in answer. Nidaja bristled.

"*What?!*" She drew her sword, facing Lyat. No one moved. Again, no one seemed to regard Nidaja as a threat to the village, or to Lyat.

"He means his bloodline, general." The older lady corrected. Nidaja snapped her focus back on her. She was silently rather impressed at her ability to speak Amanian. The emerald Amanian decided it would be a good idea to know who this was for future engagements with the Asuna. If the conflict was to end, they would need a good contact who understood the language.

"Who are you?!" the general demanded.

"Kiranna... Elder of this village, and close servant to the empress." Her answer was dry and fearless. Nidaja knew she probably had nothing to fear with the numbers stacked against her.

"What do they want from his bloodline?" She fumed at the older Asuna. Lyat tugged Nidaja.

"Come, we go. We are having less time now." He stated.

"Less time for what?" she cried, the general wresting herself free from his tug.

"Alps is going without Reika forcing. He is taking less time to convince if he is understanding. We are having much less time.

"It's too late to stop it Lyat, even if you tell her why." Kiranna said. "You won't help matters by going."

"I am taking him back!" Nidaja threatened.

“Who, Alps? If he will come back with you, you are welcome to keep him. We need him, but we won’t need him to stay. He will be free to go home when it’s done.” she stated matter-of-factly. Lyat tugged her again. Nidaja turned and strode off as several large Asuna pulled the two guards inside and slammed and locked the gate.

“Lyat is surprised they let you live, knowing what Asuna is after now.” He stated.

“I still don’t understand!” she barked, following along.

“Lyat will tell you...” he said softly. “Kiranna is right.. If Alps is going willingly, is too late to make any difference, so is not mattering if you know.” Nidaja plodded along through the mud and rock and listened to the Asuna as he explained why all this had to be...

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The trip had been just as painful as Alps had imagined it would be. He nearly fainted every thousand steps or so, and he had thrown up three times from the pain. Even Reika seemed to be a little more concerned. She tried to inspect Alps’ arm a few times, but he would not let her. It hurt too much to even move it. Alps didn’t want Reika to see his weakness, still furious with her for his injury, and her lack of control. He hoped not to see her again when this was done, which he found to be a rather rare feeling for him to have.

Against all the odds the slave had stacked up against him making the trip with his injury, they stood now at what looked like a wall stretched between the steep canyon entrance to a mountain valley. The air was cooler here, and there were trees everywhere, so it seemed like an alien world in comparison to the last place they had been. There were dozens of warriors standing about, but none moved from their post or even looked at Alps as he moved slowly among them with Reika. The gates, enormous and thick, made of blackened and hardened wood and reinforced with iron, stood over him at easily forty feet tall. They wrenched open slowly, as if by screws, slowly drawn open by an apparent pulley system inside the gate. They did not need to open far to let the two of them through, and that is all they opened, before slowly closing.

Before Alps stretched a city that, while the design seemed completely different for every building, the size and scope were almost equal to Jalana, even if a little smaller than Diera. There were no signs of battle or conflict in this place. The buildings were angular, seeming to be flat-topped pyramid-like structures mostly, made to handle extreme weathering, and even damage from falling rocks perhaps, which Alps assumed might happen based on the sheer canyon walls that towered more than two hundred feet on either side of the city. The canyon ended about two miles in the distance, coming to a point, and in that point existed a castle or fortress built right into the canyon

wall. The place was made to withstand a kind of assault that Alps knew the Amanian army would not be capable of. It was a shocking display of the real strength of the Asuna. Still, while he was the only Lupine among them, walking along the cobblestone and dirt streets, he was not accosted, approached, or even looked at. He knew why. To notice Alps would acknowledge his threat, his strength, and they had likely been told not to look at any escorted Lupine to remind them how weak they were. He could guess that much from how Reika treated him, not even talking to him as they walked along the street. He looked up the steep canyon walls for a while as he walked, and discovered immediately that it was a mistake, as he became dizzy from the vertigo and pain.

Alps crumpled to the street, that wave of pain taking over him and upsetting his tummy again.

“Don’t. Not on Asuna street.” She said warningly. Alps whined, swallowing back his bile, and staggered to his feet.

“I can’t keep...” the wolf whimpered.

“You is not hurting soon, you see.” Reika said softly. Alps was a little surprised at how much he didn’t care what that meant. He plodded along behind his captor, in more pain than he could remember having been in the past. He felt as sick and weak as every one of those Asuna thought he was. The streets were fairly quiet, comparatively. Alps realized it was because no one would even talk when he was nearby. It was as if they were trying to be invisible.

A about two hours of walking through the city, the sun slowly waning, had Alps at the steps that led up to the massive fortress. He looked up the stairs and shook his head at Reika. He could not do it. The hyena looked at him quietly a moment, and then moved to his side and whispered into his ear.

“It is being alright. They not expecting you to walk in on your own.” With those words, Alps felt a sudden thump at the back of his neck, and then, thankfully, he felt nothing. Unconscious at last. He never thought he would be so thankful to be knocked out.

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The white-furred wolf felt like there was a powerful rainstorm going on in his head, and the thought of rain reminded him of his injuries, but he didn’t feel any pain. He looked up at the ceiling. It was ornate and structured, the kind of thing he was sure he’d see in the castle. Was he home? Had it been another case of Twilight Fever, all of it? He sat up.

“Oh look... The Amani housewife is awake.” came Reika’s likely carefully planned insult. Nope, it was definitely and unfortunately not a dream. He looked over at his captor. She was dressed quite nicely, actually, wearing a somewhat exotic looking white blouse with large silver frog buttons on both sides and dark sheer-fabric pants, and slender dark shoes upon her feet. She looked very clean and far better kept than Alps remembered her. Her short hair was clean and well groomed. She actually looked quite attractive despite the wolf’s personal distaste for her.

“So, did we make it? We are in Puranasse?” he asked. “How long was I out?”

“Only maybe half day and a half. Reika is thinking you be out for like... a week. Rios attend your wounds.” As soon as Reika spoke, Alps’ focus snapped back to his arm, expecting stabbing pain when he tried to move it, but, while it felt weak, it didn’t hurt. He moved it around, rotated, waved, and even clenched his fist, looking carefully at his arm.

“That... That’s impossible. It was broken. I felt it moving around in there.” The wolf knew what a broken arm felt like. He’d endured them before. He then laid his hand in his lap, realizing that his blanket had fallen away, exposing him a little. He didn’t know why he bothered being embarrassed. She had plenty of time to inspect him if his clothes had been removed.

“It was impossible for your doctors where you come from, but not impossible for me... and not impossible for you, if you could believe that.” A new voice spoken was soft, silky, and flowing, like smoke in the breeze. Alps turned. On the other side of the room, sitting in a tall, ornate chair, one foot on her knee bouncing casually, sat a creature unlike anything Alps had ever seen before. She seemed very much like an Asuna, but her ears were taller and triangular, like his, and her tail, instead of being shorter and more slender, was every bit as long and full as his own. Her markings were all those of an Asuna, but her features seemed a little less blunt and more angular. It was like looking at a half-breed. Was that even possible? He was sure he’d have heard of them or seen them before now.

“Empress Dominis...” the white slave murmured softly. Somehow, he just knew. She wore simple silky and graceful black robes, so she wasn’t dressed like a leader or anyone special, just comfortably, as if she might be going to bed shortly. But her power was obvious, just in looking at her.

“That obvious, is it?” she asked.

“I had assumed you would be different, for the kind of power you had over your people.” Alps sat up fully and murmured, “How can my arm be fully healed in less than a day?” he asked.

“Letai draw life energy. I am sure you already know this.” Rios said, getting up and stepping over to Alps, stroking his cheek. A chill ran down his spine. Something about her felt a lot more powerful than even being in the presence of Nita. Maybe even more than being around a Letai priestess.

“I had been told, yes.” It was true, even if only days before it had been explained to him. “But I didn’t know that Asuna were capable of using the essence like that. I thought it was just a Letai thing... But I guess the Emerald Amanians aren’t Letai, and they can use the essence, so it should not surprise me.” the wolf stated, rubbing his arm, as if unable to believe it had been made whole while he slept.

“It is a Letai-only trait. The Emerald Amanian tribe is descended directly from a Letai bloodline.” Rios stated calmly. Alps arched his brow. He’d heard that, but there was not really ever any proof given, and many, including him, thought that it was something to help elevate the people’s opinion of their ruling family. The lupine then blinked at a realization. The lupine features of the Asuna sitting before him. His head snapped up, looking Rios in the eyes. They were violet as his, and like all the emerald tribe.

“Wait... You mean you are ... You are part Letai?” he asked, suddenly finding himself visibly excited. Kiranna had been right. Rios was likely to be able to tell him more about the Letai than Misty ever could, and while he could have learned a lot from Luna, he’d not have been able to learn that some had escaped, maybe to join the Asuna.

“I am, but only a quarter.” Rios’ answer was remarkably humble for someone with the kind of power that she needed to possess to be able to heal his arm the way she did. She stroked the slave’s face again, seeming to actually admire him. The look in her eyes was not that of an enemy, or even of someone who knew they were more powerful, but Alps could feel her strength, her power in the room. He also felt a little dopey and hot, not entirely sure why.

“I guess now would be as good a chance as any...” Alps whispered, trying to find the best words, as long as he’d waited to ask them, “... Could I please ask what you needed with me? In taking me, you risk open war.” He explained. Rios smiled at that and shook her head.

“There will be no war. I will be releasing you safely back with your people when you are finished here, do not fear.” Alps listened to her words, but it didn’t tell him anything. It did make him feel a little relief. There had always been the doubt at the back of his mind that he’d get to return without a fight. He found it hard to feel that the empress would bother lying about that to him when she had all the power in the world to just keep him there against his will.

“What will I be doing here?” he asked. “What must be done?” He suspected it had something to do with releasing more Letai from crystals. Reika spoke up softly, moving over to sit at the edge of the bed.

“See? Is asking so many questions. Stupid weak wolf.” She announced. Alps flattened his ears. He was still angry at Reika for breaking his arm, even if it wasn’t broken now.

“I willingly walked into the very citadel of the enemy without having to be dragged to face what fate had in store for me. How is that weak?” the wolf asked. Reika rolled her eyes, but the empress made an odd clicking noise with her teeth, like biting the air, which seemed to have some kind of significance to Reika, as her ears went back and she seemed apologetic immediately.

“Reika, he’s right. That took more strength than most Asuna or even Letai could muster. But what comes next won’t require strength, just understanding, and maybe a little endurance, I hope.” There was a pause, and Alps looked over at the Letai-Asuna mix, tilting his head curiously.

“I am not sure I understand...” the wolf rumbled softly. “I’m an understanding Amanian, or I would not be here, I can assure you. Not alive at least. And I grew up as a slave, so I have endurance, as it were, what is it I need to know? What is it I need to do?” he asked.

“Amanians and Asuna cannot mix. Their bloodlines are barren to one another. Reika could take you every day for the rest of her life and not have an heir to show for it.” The words that Rios spoke were so matter-of-fact and shameless, but it made Alps’ ears go scarlet almost as bad as the first time Nidaja spoke openly to Misty about Alps having sex with her. Surely he didn’t have an effect on the Asuna from afar so much that they would kidnap him. He tried to piece together why she would even say it. Then another question came to mind.

“The Letai are Lupine...” He folded his hands in his lap, a little defensively, given the subject. “... If Asuna and Lupines can’t mix, how could you even exist?” he asked. Rios smiled a bit.

“Quick on the uptake, huh? That’s helpful,” she said softly, “Amanian and Asuna can’t mix, this is true, but Letai are a different story.” Alps perked up. Different in what regard, he wondered. Rios let Alps mull that over, and then waited more, perhaps trying to see how fast he’d get it. She placed her hands over her head, stretching a bit as she seemed to revel in the awkward silence a bit, and seeming to actually show off her form a little for Alps. Reika was paying attention too, as if she’d not even been told the plan. It would not surprise the slave if she hadn’t, of course. She was the empress after all, and didn’t have to share everything with her subordinates. Remembering this, Alps found himself feeling ashamed for how irreverent he’d been acting. But, it was not any different to him than when he was with Nita. She was the ruler of her kingdom, just like

Rios was with hers. It didn't feel odd at all to be in her company. How strange Alps' life had become...

"So, there is something about the Letai that let them pass their progeny on to Asuna, leading to what is now the ruling class, just like they could pass their progeny on to the Amanians, leading to what became the Emerald Tribe?" Alps considered his words as he spoke, still not able to see where capturing him fit into all this. Then, his eyes widened, a possibility fluttering through his head. Impossible. She could not have meant that. That made no sense to him. He waited for the empress to answer, not wanting to insult her with the idea that had rooted itself suddenly in his mind.

"Correct. The Letai are bound close to the life essence, and as such, the divisions physically that prevent a mix from occurring with the Amanian and Asuna are blurred a bit. More than a bit. A lot. That kind of life energy in their blood gives them the ability to cross those impermeable lines." Rios walked back and forth in front of Alps as she explained, the white wolf sitting on the bed, hanging on her every word. "It's a very powerful tool of survival they have had all along, but they opted to keep their bloodline pure for a very long time because of the worry of the sudden influx of new power in a group not used to having it causing open war, which was definitely counter-productive to what the Letai valued. Some time long ago, however, a new tribe was born in the Asuna, and the High Asuna tribe held a seat of power as a result of the abilities we were born with. It is suspected that the Letai may have finally mixed in an effort to form an alliance. It was too late perhaps, but quite a lot of the half-breeds existed for centuries, most of them keeping hidden from Mannus' watchful eye, but he did manage to find them, over time, and whittle them down." Alps winced at that.

"Whittle them down? Surely that would have been hard to do if they were trying to hide, and they looked similar enough..." he noted. Alps was sure they would have been able to grow in strength over time. Creatures with that kind of power and wisdom would not be removed easily, just as the Letai had not been. It took a century, so he'd been told. The empress shook her head softly.

"The Asuna-Letai had immense power, this is true, but Alps, we had a major disadvantage. Amanian Letai are born of the Letai who were, themselves, Lupine. The Emerald Tribe was able to pass their progeny to other Amanians, Emerald or not, and even though it thinned the bloodline to do so, and reduced their power over time, they were able to continue the bloodline still, and through carefully planned marriages and family-structure, they started to bring the power back after a time. It was part of the reason for selecting the Emerald Tribe as a focus of power and governance for the Amanian Empire." The explanation still didn't connect all the dots for Alps. It only left him more confused.

"So why didn't the Asuna do the same thing, if the high Asuna were losing their strength or their hold on the empire here, even in secret?" he asked. Rios looked down, seeming a little sad at that notion.



"We can't. We can only produce offspring with those who were also directly descended of the original Letai Asuna," she states. "There were originally twelve families, but Mannus killed them off over time, until there were only four, and it was hard to prevent inbreeding, and ultimately, those High Asuna that were still being produced were insane, violent, underpowered former visions of the esteem we once held, and led the Asuna into four warring tribes. A hundred and twenty years ago, a few of our last wise leaders who were *not* part of the High Asuna took children from each of the four families, and began to work out the flaws, carefully making a more stable, cleaner High Asuna who would be able to lead again. In the process of all of this, the stronger family line that arose, my grandparents, and my parents, and finally myself... united the clans. Now, we are under one banner, even if still under Mannus' thumb. Yes, I am the result of that powerful family, but there is some misfortune involved in all that. Mannus found out what we were, and dealt with the matter himself." There was a heavy tone of regret sounded in the empress' voice.

"There aren't any more High Asuna. Just you." Alps stated, widening his eyes again. He finally latched onto the direction this was going, and his ears flattened at the very stark and obvious reason for all of this now.

"Right. I am the last one," the empress explained, "The other families were killed off, and those who do remain are so badly diseased and flawed that even if they were not sterile, I would not want to bear their progeny I can openly say." Alps sat up straight, looking at Rios sternly.

"So your only chance to continue your bloodline and give strong leadership to the Asuna in the future... is to find a Letai male." As Alps said it, his heart raced. With the promise for his life together with Nita, he could not dream of betraying her like that... giving his first born to the Asuna empress whom he'd just met. It was unconscionable. Rios smiled at him as he got the drift.

"Right. Not only would you allow the line to continue, but you would dramatically strengthen it. When I first heard the report from Diera that a male lupine with violet eyes who was not a part of the Emerald Tribe had been Shadowfallen, I was crushed. I knew that you had to have been Letai, at least in part, and I thought the only chance I had went with you, but then, I heard something that was even more incredible, and my heart soared with joy. You broke out. You destroyed your prison. I don't know if the Amanians were doing the same work that we tried, to make a pure line, or if somehow your line was just missed by Mannus, and that there are Letai hiding in the world today, but you are here now, and I cannot pass up this chance, my only chance to have an heir. This power is needed for us to get out from under the yoke of our horrible master, and once we have broken free, the High Asuna will no longer be needed. The path has been laid out before us. We must embrace our destiny. Will you do this for me, Alps?" Rios asked. The wolf looked down at his hands.

There were a number of things to think about, to be sure. If he accepted what she desired, the effect could be that the strife between the Asuna and the Amanians

would end immediately, because it would be Alps' wish, his deal to make with her, but in the same process, he'd be giving rise to a powerful enemy if that notion did not stick, or the progeny grew up to hate his kind.

The offer that had just been made was not that unusual from how the rest of Alps' life had gone since he left Luca. He lived for the pleasure of others, but this was different. It was not about pleasure. What Rios wanted from Alps was a lot bigger than that, even if he was allowed to go home when he was done, it would mean that he chose to do something that could forever haunt him and Nita, and bring her much sorrow. On top of that, what world would his blood be born into? Warring factions of violent Asuna ready to kill one another, Mannus himself hunting down the bloodline as relentlessly as he could, it would be a nightmare existence. Alps shook his head.

"I cannot. I belong to my love, Nita Razelle. I cannot betray her like that." He said softly.

"Except with her sister, from what I was told by Reika." Rios retorted. Alps gritted his teeth.

"That is with her permission, her choice." Alps stated, knowing full well in the past he'd been allowed to have others if he wanted, but now that he was to be married, he wanted to only give himself to Nita, or to those of her family that she saw fit. He was hers to keep or share as she intended. That was not hard to express, surely.

"I won't be asking her permission this time, Alps." Rios said standing up, moving her hands to her shoulders. She began to draw down her robes. Alps sat forward like he was going to try to leave. Reika's hand came to his shoulder and pulled him down heavily, forcing him to the bed. Alps widened his eyes. Surely they were not silly enough to think they could take something like that by force? Physically it didn't work like that. The beautiful Asuna stood over him, slowly letting the robes fall from her shoulders, hugging her chest to keep them modest a moment.

"Empress, you can't be serious! You know if I don't want this, it won't work." He growled. Reika lifted her hand to strike Alps, and he winced, but when he looked up, Rios was holding her subordinate's wrist. The smaller, but more brutal Asuna looked miffed about it. Rios looked back down to Alps.

"I don't think you understand... You won't be leaving here, ever, unless I get what I need from you." The Asuna leader looked very serious about what she was saying. "And you have the next two days to think on it before you have to wait until next month, and I shall allow Reika to be your caretaker for that month. Believe me when I say you do not want that. Just do this and you can leave." Rios said firmly. Alps blinked at her.

"I... I might be able to free another Letai from a Shadowfall Crystal," Alps offered, trying to find a way to get out of the fix he was suddenly in. The thought of being forced

to this and explaining to a heartbroken Nita was more than he could bear. Rios looked at him curiously.

“An ability I certainly did not realize you had, but you did get out of a Shadowfall, so I imagine you capable...” she stated. She thought on it, then shook her head, Alps’ hopes sinking. “A neat idea, but typically, females were Shadowfallen, males were slain. Not sure why. But even if a few did get cast into the darkness instead, like you did, getting them out would be nearly impossible. Even if we could get our hands on one of those coveted crystals, which would not be easy, it’s a lottery. We don’t know who we would find in there, or if it would be a male, and in that time we’d be wasting valuable time. That’s a risk far larger than I am willing to take when I have a sure thing naked on the bed right in front of me.” The empress growled a bit to make the point that she would not be flexible on that decision, even if it were possible.

Alps’ eyes flitted side to side quickly as he tried to think rapidly about what needed to be said or done. There had to be another way. He had an entirely different angle to think about it. He perked his ears, speaking again.

“How about an Emerald Amanian? Couldn’t you get one of them, and join the Letai side of both?” he asks. Rios frowned at Alps, seeming irritated with the stalling.

“Do you really think that over the centuries we would have failed to try that? Repeatedly? We used to call captured male Emeralds ‘ferns’ because they were kept like pets, and frequently ‘watered’ by their keepers at that, all in hopes that it might work, just once. Hundreds of years, and nothing. No, it doesn’t work. They are just different enough to prevent it, it seems.” Alps drooped, considering this. He suddenly felt a pang of guilt for what he was doing. He was denying Rios something that she obviously wanted all her life. Not just the chance to allow her people to have a stable leader, and perhaps have a brighter future than the last hundred years had given, but the simple chance to be a mother, which she would have absolutely no other way. He sighed softly, rubbing the back of his head, uncertain.

“So... I Just... do this and I am free? How will I get home through Asuna territory?” he asked.

“I will have Reika escort you right to whatever location you desire. You will be safe, you have my word, so long as I have yours.” Rios stated. Alps considered this for a bit, working out a plan in his head. He would get to go home when he was done, but she might allow him to leave even before she knew whether or not she was carrying a child, so he could allow her to think the gift had been given, and by the time she knew otherwise, perhaps he would already be safely back with Nita. That at least was worth a chance, and if it didn’t work... well... maybe he really had no choice. Alps nodded slowly to Rios.

“If I have your word, I will do it.” He murmured. “Your people have a right to the stability you offer, and will continue to offer from your family line.”

"I knew you'd understand." Rios said softly, a genuinely joyful smile spreading over her charcoal muzzle, her ears laying back fondly as she regarded the wolf sitting on the bed before her. The other Asuna in the room, however, growled a bit. Alps looked back over to her curiously. He'd agreed to her empress' wishes, why would she be angry?

"You cost Reika so much gold..." the other Asuna said darkly. She scowled at the slave, making it apparent that she'd bet against his going along with the plan. He gritted his teeth, wondering what might have happened to him if he refused outright. Still, he felt he could manage this, so long as he could make it back with his love, and his family, in his own home. He was less worried about Mannus following mention of him if there were matters of greater importance happening closer to home, like an Asuna insurrection. Reika got up and moved over to the heavy door at the side of the room by a long silk curtain. She opened the door, speaking in her guttural tongue to the guards waiting outside, and then closed and obviously locked the door. Alps swallowed.

"Wait... Right now?" he asked, feeling greatly surprised. Rios finally let her robes spill around her. Alps' eyes followed the robes, and then shot back up, the wolf sitting at attention as Reika came back beside the bed. The younger Asuna seemed to not be very surprised or shy about this at all. Had this always been the plan? She had certainly been serious about not waiting any longer than needed, right down to the minute.

"We not be disturbed, Empress." Reika said softly, looking back to Alps. "I stay to make sure." Her words were solid and did not offer the opening for argument. Rios nodded to the shorter Asuna and stood before Alps, her hands on her hips as if trying to decide what exactly she wanted to do with him. Alps looked up and down her strong-looking form, and knew exactly what every cell in his body wanted to do to her, though he dare not make it so obvious. He was afraid of insulting the empress, especially in front of Reika. Rios had a build much more like Nidaja's rather than like Nita's. Strong and sure, solidly built for battle if need be, even though she was the leader, and surely didn't have to fight that much. If she were insulted, Alps imagined she would not need Reika to punish him.

"This can be pleasant if you want it to be." Rios said softly, crawling up on the bed. Alps looked at her intently, his nose quivering as he took in her scent. The hot feeling he felt earlier, that tangy, musky feminine scent, was his natural attraction to her during her season of fertility. He was surprised that an Asuna would have that effect, but she was part lupine too, so he could understand. He got on his knees in front of her, nude, and shameless, but he looked to Reika. Was she just going to watch? Why wouldn't Reika leave them to do this on their own? The younger Asuna folded her arms in front of her, crossed as if waiting to see what he'd do. Alps suddenly realized that Rios, due to her position, and due to the warlike nature of the Asuna, was not *allowed* to be alone. If the wolf tried anything, he'd be dead faster than he could finish. That put a

bit of pressure on Alps. He had to make sure that he was not being too aggressive with this.

"I would hope it to be pleasant for you as well." Alps spoke regally bowing to the Asuna leader. She smiled to him and murmured softly,

"I had expected this would be more difficult, so by you being so understanding, I think it will be pleasant for us both." She moved toward Alps and stroked his cheek again, before pulling his blanket away, leaving his firming shaft rather obvious, pink, thick, bobbing softly up and down between his thighs. He suddenly felt a little embarrassed, not because of what he was doing, but because he wondered if he was bigger or smaller intimately than an Asuna would be? Would he be a disappointment to the Asuna leader? She did not seem to be unhappy, but Reika merely smirked, which made the wolf more self-conscious. That weakness thing again. He swallowed a bit, knowing that he had to have seemed weak with his phallus doing the swaying in the breeze thing before him. He was very uncomfortable and worried. It was not going to be easy to perform unless he had a little time to get into it.

There was a short pause as Alps and the Empress looked at each other. The wolf looked up into her eyes, seeing their amethyst shine and the brightness of the life that lay behind them. She was powerful, but here she was, bare before him, someone that she should have seen as an enemy. And she seemed the weaker of the two. Alps' eyes traced her form up and down slowly, measuring everything about her. Her breasts were modest, closer to Nita's than Nidaja's, so her body looked even more athletic as a result, but where the fur along Nidaja's sex was a little longer and silky in a neat, well groomed tuft, the fur along the front of Rios' body was thin and velvety, more like Misha, and her flesh almost bare where her mound pouted warmly between her thighs, a very obvious sign of her nudity, enough to make Alps blush a little for looking so closely, committing that body to memory. He snapped out of it and shook his head, commenting softly,

"Err... I don't want to seem callous and do something you would never..." Alps spoke in a soft tone, looking away, realizing he had definitely been staring.

"I'm not new to this, you know." The empress seemed to try to regain her composure a bit. "I was wondering the same thing. I mean, what not to do or what you might like. I'm experienced with lovers of my own kind, but don't know what you... I mean..." there was another long pause. Alps looked back at her, his eyes trailing up and down her form as they both looked at one another from either side of the bed. It was Reika who broke the silence.

"You boring, wolf." Her tone was rather frustrated.

"I know very well how to tend to my lover, I will have you know." Alps said defensively, "I just don't know if those are the right things to try with the empress is all." His final words were a little meeker, as he fought back his blush.

“Just do that then.” Reika said, motioning to Rios. “You is insulting if you is not accepting the right to bring pleasure.”

“To bring pleasure...” Alps said softly, remembering the discussion with Kiranna before. He got his power from it. He’d get stronger, healthier if he brought her pleasure. And bringing pleasure was something he was well equipped to handle, both in his strength and his training with his new family. He would have the chance to show the empress what he’d been taught. At the very least some of it could be the same, and if it was, he had his confidence about him he could do this right, and leave her so oversensitive she’d not know that the wolf didn’t really flood her womb. She’d surely not be able to tell. He then snapped out of his thoughts, smiling boldly to the empress, and then suddenly laying on his side, rolling onto his back in front of her, and pushing himself between her outstretched thighs.

“What are you...” she started, and then, as his muzzle clamped closed over her dark, soft, bare folds, the hyena-wolf mix squeaked. Alps closed his eyes, savoring the bare flesh of her mound, her folds parting over his sliding, swirling, stroking tongue as his back arched, the wolf getting more comfortable. Alps found that he actually very much liked the bare flesh of those tangy folds as he let them dance against his tongue in Rios’ trembling anxiousness. It made him remember, very easily, that she was a lady, and felt this just the way any other lady would!

“Dumb wolf, that is not being right at all, you-“ Reika started, but Rios made the clicking sound that she seemed to use to shut Reika up again. Alps grinned. It might look odd to the young Asuna, since that was an odd thing to do even for the Amanians from what Alps had been told, but the slave knew very well how potent the effect was on his lover and his friends. He was happy to find it had an effect on Rios as well. He folded his ears back and set to work, also happy that the act of doing this made him hard as a rock very quickly, something that the empress took note of quickly, placing a hand on him and stroking his pink length against his tummy sensually, exploring him. She didn’t give too much attention, however, as she seemed a lot more lost in the attention that her companion was now giving.

“Nnhnn... I will... admit... This is a first for me, but I promise it won’t be the last. I know a few Asuna who will be cursing your name for... ooh... showing me this... They will have to learn... to like it...” she huffed. Reika moved back to the bed, sitting down, watching what Alps was doing apparently. She didn’t move to touch either of them, but she seemed curious. With how insane the younger Asuna had seemed to Alps, he wondered if seeing this was just pointless to the girl.

Alps continued to slather his tongue over those tangy folds. He was delighted to find that, essentially, there was absolutely no difference between an Asuna lover and an Amanian one where this act of pleasuring was concerned. The little button that Alps had learned to focus on with Nita was right where it should be, and responded exactly the same, and Rios responded as well, hands planting beside the wolf’s thighs as she

huffed over his lap, not brave enough, perhaps, to take him in her muzzle in return, but being that she was the empress, and was being watched, Alps didn't expect she would. She did, however, offer the attention of her caressing hand from time to time, but could never give it very long before the pleasure Alps was working upon her distracted too much and she just had to hold the bed.

"Is feeling so good?" Reika asked, still sitting on the edge of the bed, watching. The wolf beneath the hyena empress grinned a bit at Reika's obvious question. The younger Asuna would probably never know what he was making Rios feel, but he was suddenly proud of the power he had in that moment.

"Huh... huh... Huhhhh..." Alps felt Rios tensing up. He held her hips as they began to softly jerk. Surely she would not be this easy... Alps pushed his tongue deep into the strong, slightly older hyena, her body held ridged over his muzzle as she placed both her hands on his thighs, then arched back, squeaking out as the wolf rapidly fluttered his tongue over Rios' little bud. She grunted, clutching his thighs just above the knees, and her hot, tangy honey just *poured* down either side of his cheeks, head, and ears. It was more copious than any of his lupine lovers, to be certain. The comment Rios had made about the other Asuna with their Emerald pets 'watering their ferns' came to mind, suddenly very clear in their meaning. Alps then whined softly. In his eyes. It got in his eyes, and it *burned* so much. He clutched his eyes shut and continued licking feverishly, the wet slapping of his tongue cutting the sound from his whines, but it wasn't enough to prevent Reika from realizing what happened. She audibly snickered. Rios was too involved in her shuddering, anxious climax to notice, though.

Alps eventually either got used to the stinging, or cried it out, and was able to go back to his deep, heavy licking, the intent being to penetrate completely, roll his tongue inside her, like a tube, and then draw it in and out rapidly, giving a nice sensation of penetration. She leaned forward to take this, and Alps brought his hands down by his hips, lifting them to begin to tease at Rio's modest breasts. Her nipples capped them large, thick and hard. Alps could not help but think that she'd be a good mother with nipples so easy to get a mouth on, but he chased the thought away, given the intent that she had. He didn't want to start thinking about that openly. She stroked Alps' heavy orbs softly, seeming to want to worshipfully coax them to provide more of his gift for her. Her lupine playmate parted his thighs a bit and groaned happily as he cupped his lips against the apex of the empress' sex, pulling her clit between his lips and suckling upon it, fluttering his tongue.

"Wolf is not weak in natural element." Reika stated, probably watching Rios' face as Alps began to suckle her clit. At least, the wolf was pretty sure she had to have made some kind of face, since she shuddered hard and poured over his ears again. The wolf had the sense to tilt his face in such a fashion that it would not get in his eyes again. He fluttered his tongue over that little bud of her clit, drinking in her potent scent. This was perhaps too much for the over-sensitive Rios, who suddenly jumped back and

moved away on the bed, cupping her soaking wet mound, trembling, looking hazily, drunkenly at Alps a moment, panting. The wolf sat up, grinning, and rumbled softly,

“Seems wolf techniques work fine, but I don’t want you to think that’s common even for our kind. I’m trained to do that.” He knew he was boasting a bit, but if there was anything he could have done to impress the two of them, it seemed that was it. Rios had felt so much pleasure she had to stop to recover. She panted raggedly, nodding, looking at Alps with her eyes fixed on his, seeming as if she were almost afraid of what he might do next.

“Alps... I don’t know who taught you that, but they have my appreciation and respect... If you give me a moment to... cool down...” Rios panted heavily, still on her knees before the white slave.

“Then her coffer is being ready for your offering.” Reika chuckled. Alps quirked a brow. A tax joke? From her? He looked back over to the empress, who now had her eyes locked on the wolf’s twitching shaft. It had been a while, obviously, since Alps had been relieved in any way. This entire trip hadn’t stoked his loins much with the promise of loving, but the pressure was there. His vein-lined length bobbed with need, longing to be touched. He gritted his teeth as Reika was the one who ultimately touched him, taking that spire in her hand, stroking up and down slowly to make a bead of his pre form at his tip, then smearing it down. By the way she did that, it was obvious that she knew at least something about lovemaking. Alps sat up a little and rumbled,

“Careful, Reika... Your empress would be cross if I were to go off now and spill it all.” He chuckled at his jest and then winced at a tight squeeze from Reika’s hand. He barked out, “Kidding, kidding. I have a bit of life in me I promise.” The wolf got on his knees, looking at Rios. The empress then rolled over softly onto her back, sprawling before the wolf, welcomingly. There was something so utterly seductive and begging in the way she looked at him, Alps knew that he could not possibly deny her the pleasure to come.

“If there is so much life in you, wolf, then I want it in me...” she whispered softly. Alps swallowed a bit, and Reika let go. The wolf moved over the empress. He was hardly able to believe that he was even able to think about doing what he was very definitely about to do. No one would stop this. It would happen, and he’d live with the knowledge that he had done this for the rest of his life. It might sadden Nita, but he would do it to get back home with her. She would understand. He could not let war happen if he had any say in it, and if this is what he’d have to do to prevent it, he counted himself lucky and happy.

The white wolf moved carefully and slowly over Rios, and Reika sat back down at the edge of the large, heavy bed. She watched as Alps slid himself up against her empress. She tilted her head back, making it apparent that she didn’t want Alps to kiss her. This was not an act of love, she was breeding with him. It was a solid reminder of how different this was from what he did with Nita, even if the oral pleasure was very



much the same. Alps slipped his hips gently against the prone Asuna's own, gasping slightly at the slick, hot feel of her bare sex kissing the tip of his twitching member. Rios didn't give Alps a chance to change his mind. Her legs hooked behind his rump and pulled him forward, sinking him into her searing, tight depths in such a deep, hot, heavenly stroke that he felt his sack draw tight immediately, and, biting his lip, barely kept himself from gushing in that first hungry gulp of his shaft from that longing, fertility-driven hyena beneath him.

As he held himself deep inside Rios, he felt her tremble, and she gave out an excited squeak, similar to her climax, but didn't gush over him this time. She just seemed happy. Alps frowned a little, looking over her, at the head of the bed. He felt bad that he might deceive her, but he had promises of his own to consider. If he could, he'd free another Letai male, and send him to her as soon as he freed him as payment for his release, he promised himself. Reika slid her hand along Alps' back, encouragingly.

"Fill Empress." The younger hyena said, pushing at the wolf's haunches. The motion made Alps remember what he was supposed to be doing. He drew his hips back, and with a wet sound to signify their hot union, their bodies came together again. Rios released Alps' haunches from her legs, her slender charcoal feet bouncing in the air a little, legs bent at the knees as she received her wolf. Alps pushed in deep and hard, but slow at first to let Rios get used to him.

The wolf was actually surprised by how tight the empress held him. She was very much like Nita in the build of her body internally, so Alps felt that she'd likely not had a lot of experience with this before hand, which might account for how easily she went over the edge with his tongue. Rios made a lot of various noises that had little or no meaning to Alps. Either they were in her own tongue, or they were parts of words mangled as he plowed her harder and faster, building up, his mind focused on making the act of release seem as real as possible for her the moment she climaxed.

Alps' tail tucked, not bouncing high over his back any more as he clutched her shoulders from underneath in his heavy hip-pounding, his mind spinning. She was taking longer to light up this way than he thought, and the wolf worried that he might not be able to hold out long enough for her climax, as slick and perfectly clutching as her inner flesh was. Reika was not helping him hold back as her hands pushed at his rump to push the wolf in deeper, actually helping him take her empress. The act in itself was lewd when in consideration of who he was "mating" with, and the fact that he was being so encouraged just to spill his essence all through her, the fact that both of these hyenas wanted nothing but that, drove Alps wild.

Still, the wolf managed to hold back, pitching himself harder and faster, feverishly against Rios. Reika held the base of Alps' tail, letting it slide through her fingers as the wolf thumped his hips hard against the elder hyena's own. The wolf gritted his teeth, trying to get into Rios' mind a little, growling out,

“Can’t hold it...” his ears folded back flatly. “I’m gonna pop... Gonna fill you... so full...” he grunted, making Rios squeak as he thumped his hips harder and faster against her still, his entire cock aching for release, but his desperate muscular contractions, even into the base of his tail, made sure he didn’t give that up.

“You is not speaking to Empress so crude, wolf. You is showing resp-“ Reika started, and got *loud* clicking from Rios, who whimpered out hotly,

“Ngff.. Mmff.. Hff.. Do it! Saturate... flood me... fill me... Ohh.. Ohhh...” the hyena began to thrash under Alps and he whined loudly, having not thought she might talk back and stroke his own loins hotter in the process. She was about to release. He had to hold out a little longer, but he could not seriously think of anything other than the bucking, thrashing, heaving, panting hot empress he was slamming against the bed with his vicious, heavy sexual frenzy, and he felt that need riding, the seed boiling in him.

“Yes... That is being good... Give!” Reika barked, seeming to actually be having fun at that point. Alps yipped loudly as Reika slapped his haunches, spanking him. He felt a race of panic rush through his veins, thinking, with that impact, he actually had exploded inside that suckling channel. He yipped out loudly!

“HuhaAAAH!” his hips grinding hard, the wolf intentionally coming to a stop, thinking he was actually already coming from the rush of pleasure that bolted through him. He had not really been hit like that during sex before, and was startled by the positive effect it had in nearly making him spray his thick load inside Rios. He trembled as he tried to hold still to keep it from happening, but Rios cried out,

“Cumming! He’s cumming, I feel it!” Alps ducked his head, gritting his teeth, his thick cock jerking and spasming inside her channel as he tried to hold back, but he suddenly wasn’t sure if he *wasn’t* cumming at that point. But he would perhaps not be able to tell easily anyway, as Rios went tight around him, clenching hard, and then a loud *splurch!* announced her wet, messy climax over his shaft, and she wailed with a volume that made him sure guards would start pouring into the bedchamber, but none arrived. They likely knew better. Alps felt pain in his tummy from how close he was to climax and still not letting himself burst, which at least made him feel better that he had not actually gushed already. He held perfectly still, his cock still twitching and jerking hard inside Rios as she splashed violently around him, making no secret of her own climax.

Alps tilts his head back, barking out loudly, “Yis! Yis! C-Cumming!” he cries, letting the pair think that Rios was right in her assumption. The jerking, spasming of that thick wolf meat inside the empress hyena was actually caused by his fighting tooth and nail not to cum, and she seemed to think he was climaxing. He held himself as deep as he could inside Rios, which let him hold a little more still and feel less of the suckling that her sex was giving him as she spasmed around him, but she took it as meaning he was spraying her deep, sinking, surrendering moans spilling from her, and an issuance of her guttural tongue, her own language, probably swearing madly all

kinds of vulgar happiness about what the wolf was supposed to be doing inside her that very moment.

The wolf held her like this a little longer, letting her slowly calm, and then slowly lowered himself over her, his thick cock still rock hard, jerking quietly inside her as he held his hips mashed wet, tight against hers, trying to ignore the soft rocking motion of her after-climax savoring of the wolf. He laid against her and tried to feel like he was soft and weak and spent from his monster climax, hoping this would be enough. He pondered whether she would make him do this multiple times, just to be sure. Alps was sure he'd not be able to make it like this repeatedly. He lowered his head a little, before slowly, carefully drawing himself free. He sat before the lovely empress, on his knees, his still tightly swollen cock bobbing over her sex, a trail of his pre and her juices linked with a little strand of that thick wetness for a second and then breaking. He blushed a bit at the view. The hyena did look very satisfied. He felt bad that he had misled her, but it was important to him.

Reika spoke softly, in her native tongue, and her empress spoke back, the two of them seeming to have some kind of playful exchange as the elder Asuna rubbed over her body, sliding her hands over her chest, then over her puffy, beaten folds, smishing and squishing her thick, tangy juices around for the wolf to watch, making his cock bounce and twitch in front of him. His tail hurt from how hard it was to hold back, and all things said, he felt like if she decided to masturbate right there in front of him, he'd not even need to be touched before he'd send thick, gooey streamers of seed all over her belly for it. He had come so dangerously close to that release every strand of fluff on his body begged for. He panted raggedly, watching the pair through half closed eyes as they talked, perhaps discussing what they had enjoyed about the little tryst they had been party to with the wolf. Then, Rios spoke up.

"Reika is embarrassed to ask..." and the younger Asuna barked with a squeak at Rios, who giggled and waved her hand dismissively at her subordinate. "Reika wants to taste a wolf to show she's as strong as you are." The empress laughed as the short-haired Asuna battered her softly with open hands in protest. Alps blushed at that. Taste him? Like, lick his tip? He didn't forbid such an idea, though he secretly feared she might bite him on principle. Still, he didn't want to insult her, especially if she would be taking him back home, hopefully soon. Alps answered softly, panting.

"Sure... I would be happy... to let her prove her strength..." he rumbled. Reika shuffled a bit at the edge of the bed, and then Rios sat up a little, and pulled Alps against her chest, letting the wolf feel her warm breasts mash against his back. He blushed at how motherly she already felt holding him that way. Rios looked to Reika and murmured,

"Go on. You can have it..." Her tone was both coaxing and teasing, as if she didn't expect Reika to actually do it. Both Alps and Rios got a surprise when the mildly psychotic hyena sank hand and muzzle both over Alps' cock. The wolf flattened his ears, eyes rolling back at the screaming rush of pleasure through his body.

“Uuuunnngghh..” he groaned, tail tucking, instinctively fighting the urge to explode right then and there. It would be too obvious he’d held back if he did, but oh how he would feel better if he got that weight out of his loins after the lustful breeding he’d just pretended to give to Rios! He gritted his teeth, lowering his head. That was more than a taste she was taking. Her hand and muzzle slipped up and down his throbbing spire. The empress watched over Alps’ shoulder, nuzzling and biting at his ears playfully as she viewed the playful Asuna subordinate enjoying her wolf-steak.

“Reika, he just went, you can’t make him just pop again!” the empress laughed, hugging Alps up to her chest. Alps panted raggedly, his body aching all over from his muscle clenching to prevent the inevitable. She very well could make it happen if she kept that up. Even if she just held him in her hot mouth and rolled her tongue around, he’s probably drown her with how he felt now. He huffed a sigh of relief as her muzzle slipped off of him. Barely made it!

“Reika is proving she is strong as wolf! She does this fast, you see!” she barked playfully.

“Fu-“ Alps yipped out as his throbbing, hot, vein-lined flesh was engulfed in hot chocolate muzzle again. She bucked her head and fist up and down his spire, the wolf curled his toes, whining. Rios whispered into Alps’ ears softly.

“How about it pretty wolf? Is she that strong? It would make her feel strong, I bet, if she tasted you. Tasted what you gave to me...” Her words were provoking, but made Alps realized two things. First, that he was allowed to cum now, which was the best news he’d had all week, and that if he did climax, Reika would feel strong, and probably vindicated and may be in much better spirits for the trip back if he just gave it to her. Quickly.

“Uhhhng..” Alps murmured out darkly, in warning, his hips tightening, rising to meet that sweet stroking hot muzzle, the feel of that broad, flat tongue under his glans working him to that point already, even if he had not decided it was okay, finally. Alps was actually surprised that he made it another five or six strokes after deciding to let go, but his body finally convulsed, and he threw his head back and howled, a nice, long, echoing howl of relief as he sprayed streamer after thick, heavy, almost painful streamer of his hot, sticky virile and potent seed into that suckling, greedy muzzle, not even able to feel bad that it was going where Rios would never have wanted it if she knew she’d been denied. Alps’ tail tucked, his back hurting from how hard he sprayed the back of Reika’s tongue. She drew off of him partly, keeping just his flaring, burning tip in her muzzle as she pumped his squirting length with her soaking wet, slick hand, making him spill every drop in her muzzle.

Alps nearly fainted from the force of it. He had been asked to hold back before, but not under these kinds of relentless, almost cruel and impossible circumstances. It had been nearly too much for him, and every second now felt like heaven. After a few

moments of trembling, and dry-twitching in Reika's hand, she pulled her lips free of his tingling, burning tip, and Rios let him drop onto the bed. The two looked at him as he lay there. Alps rolled onto his side and looked up at them dizzily.

"Reika... is definitely a strong Asuna. Stronger than a wolf." Alps complimented. Rios smiled at the lupine as he lay there, and she laid back on her back, thighs parted, alongside him. She looked at the slave with happy, knowing eyes. Reika was facing away slightly, so Alps could not read her expression. He worried a little that he'd somehow insulted her by complimenting her. She had not said it was against the rules. He lay there, still twitching in post orgasmic bliss, barely able to move.

"Reika is also one of my most trusted and dear friends. As close to a sister as I have ever had." Rios spoke softly, Alps sitting up with some concern as he watched her. The younger female Asuna reached back and pushed Alps, making him slide to the edge of the bed. He stood up, looking at her from behind on weak legs, wondering why she was making him get off the bed, not speaking, not facing him. Was this some kind of superiority ritual? Rios certainly did not seem to be unhappy.

"Is... everything alright?" Alps asked, warily. Then, Reika moved over Rios' prone form, looking down at her lovingly. Alps blinked at her expression, not sure what to make of it. She looked like she had her cheeks puffed out... Then he froze.

"Everything is fine. You didn't think we had overlooked that you might not be entirely... cooperative, did you?" the empress crooned softly. Alps felt like he was going to faint, not just from the afterglow. Reika lowered her head, placed her hands on the back of Rios' thighs, spreading them and cupped her mouth over the bare, puffy, wet sex of her empress, and the wolf heard a loud *squoultch* from the heavy, rather forceful exchange. His heart dropped in his stomach. The potent, thick, copious contents of Reika's muzzle emptied deep inside Rios, the older, stronger Asuna dropping back, crying out happily as she received her gift from her trusted servant.

"N... No... That..." he stammered, realizing that they had worked out the plan the moment they knew, somehow, that he'd held back as they spoke in their native tongue. His plan had come undone so easily, and now, if there was to be a life to gain from him, if he really was Letai the way they said... Well, he was certainly going to find out if he was Letai soon enough. He dropped to his knees. "That was so... unfair..." he whimpered.

"Such a weak wolf." Reika murmured softly, Rios spreading the smaller hyena's ears affectionately ruffling her hair. Alps put his head in his arms, fighting back tears of ... of what? Why was he upset? He was going to be forced to do this? What was he afraid of now? He gritted his teeth, choking back his tears.

"You selfish thing! For the last time, I am not weak! I have more power than you will ever dream of, but it doesn't come from hurting people and taking advantage of

people. It comes from doing what I think is right, and making those I love happy!" he barked. "Kiranna said so herself! If I am Letai, I am far stronger!"

"Wulf can't protect himself or his friends." Reika said, laying against Rios' thighs happily. Rios, however, looked a little less happy. Alps didn't care if she regretted what she did, though. She got what she wanted from him. Now he'd just go home. To what? How would Nita feel about this? Would she even believe the scenario played out the way it did? Surely she would know he couldn't lie to her. And Nidaja could find the memory of it in her Mindwalk sphere. So what was eating him up?

"Alps, the life you give, this gift, be it stolen or freely given, will give the Asuna a future. You should be proud. It is my vow to try to foster a peace between our people, as it will be needed if either the Asuna or the Amani are to face Mannus. Believe me, Alps. That is my intention. You should not be upset. You bring about a glorious change for both our people." Alps looked down, shaking softly, not sure if it was from fear, rage, or just being blitzed from his climax.

"Can I go home?" Alps asked.

"Not yet." Rios answered. The wolf thumped his fist into the bed, making Reika get onto her knees, defensively, as if he might attack Rios. Alps wasn't that stupid.

"You promised." the lupine growled.

"Yes, when I know I carry new life. It will be a few weeks before we know. And I would appreciate your cooperation in the meantime, given that you can be sure now that you have no choice." Rios' words were firm and soft, making Alps think even more that she would make a good mother, but it made him realize even more that her intentions had been for this all along. Reika said softly,

"Empress Dominis... is keeping promise." Reika said.

"Rios." Alps stated coldly. Reika glowered at Alps and attempted to slap him with the back of her hand. Alps caught it, a little surprised at the fact that he had, given the force behind it. Reika jerked her hand back. Alps looked at her with narrow eyes, and then back to the empress. She looked back at him very seriously.

"I will let no harm come to those I care for." He stood back up, hands at his side, looking into Rios' eyes. "... and if this is what fate has decided for me..." he looked between the pair. "... then I shall care for the Asuna as well."

## Sirius, Book III

### The Essence

*Comments or Questions?*

Contact Alps: [sarsis@gmail.com](mailto:sarsis@gmail.com)

Or just drop a note at: <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/sarsis/>

## Chapter 12

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Rain pelted the ground outside as Alps looked out the double doors to the balcony. The palace he was in now was not any less lavish than the one he resided in with Nita, though it was about half its size. The population of the Asuna versus his own people was about the same, they just didn't elevate their ruling class in the same way. It wasn't the entire family of the empress, as it might have been for the Emerald Amanians, it was just the Empress herself, and those who protected her. Alps watched a few Asuna wander by through the rain on the cobblestone street below. Their bare feet splashed on the wet stones, and their square little shields, pulled over their heads, kept the rain off of them to an extent, though as the wind was blowing, not so effectively.

Alps was told that this was the rainy season. As it had rained so much through his trip, he could believe it. He had been lost in thought most of the morning. How could he not be? Rios had mentioned that she was feeling a "warm glow" and was sure that the first night had taken nicely, even as she'd made Alps perform twice more, with Reika's "assistance", of course. He felt guilty about it because it still felt wonderful, even if he didn't really want to commit himself in any way to Rios. He knew it brought her pleasure, and his enjoyment was his reaction to that pleasure, but it still made his mind heavy with worry.

The thing that weighed on his mind the most was the simple fact that his own flesh and blood, his first born, would not be Nita's, and that he would worry constantly over the kind of life the child would lead. What if the child were male? Would he need to be kidnapped again until Rios had a daughter? Nita certainly would not stand for that, but would she understand any of this at all? Surely she would not think that he should have fought to the death and risked his life to prevent this. In the end, she'd still have him back. Alps turned and left the room, going downstairs to a room he'd become rather acquainted with. The library.

After a few flights of stairs, and a number of guards that pretended he was invisible, which Alps never quite got used to, the lupine walked into the large, cavernous room that housed much of the assembled knowledge of a crushed race. Which was not much in comparison to the library in Diera, he found. Alps could not read most of the things in the library, but it was eerily quiet, and it was a good place to think where he was not likely to be harassed by Reika, who didn't seem to enjoy the amount of attention Rios was giving him. A few of the books he found in there, larger and heavier than most that he found in Misty's personal collection, had pictures of famous people,

battles, and even of the Letai. He knew that these were what the pictures were of because of the crest that adorned the vestments and banners they carried. The mark was of a crescent upturned, The Mother's Hand, they called it, and a sphere inside it, the essence, cupped within the mother's hand. The Letai, Alps was finding, particularly revered mothers, who brought new life into the world. How ironic that he should suffer for that same desire that the Letai so revered.

The wolf sat back down in a chair, heavily, considering that. The past two days had been so hectic for him emotionally. More than any time he could recall since leaving Chana behind. At first, he was furious with Rios, and was disgusted with her for the level of contempt she had in forcing him into this, but in this very library, looking at these pictures, and even asking Reika, rarely, a few questions, he started to get a better picture of what life meant for the Asuna, and what terrible sacrifices they were expected to make for Mannus just to ensure he did not slaughter every last one of them. In a matter of days he softened his hatred of Rios and Reika, replacing it with soft, sad sympathy.

What would *he* do to end all the suffering? He could understand a little better now what forces would provoke such a seemingly selfish act. In the end, it was easy to feel that Alps' wishes were not significant in comparison. After all, he would still be going home. He'd still have his life. Things were far worse here than the life that he was going to be going back to.

These thoughts did not bring the wolf comfort, however. Understanding lead to forgiveness which made Alps feel better in one way, but generated a deeper sense of empathy for Rios' people. It made him worry more that his bloodline would be passed on to this world only for short-lived misery. He was especially concerned with what he discovered only the previous day. A law called the Second Child Promise that all the Asuna lived with. This was the breaking point for Alps' anger with the spotted race. He shook away the thought of this injustice and looked at his stack of books he had yet to go through. He didn't even know what he was looking for, but he didn't feel like lying around doing nothing. As a slave, nothing felt more "wrong" than idleness.

The white lupine began thumbing, again, through one of these books, when he found a few pages here and there written in Amanian. He had not expected this in an Asuna book, but he peered over the pages in curiosity. Misty had taught him to read a bit better, so with a bit of struggling he gleaned some meaning from the pages. The pages referred to techniques the Letai used. There were apparently different schools of essence users. This was immediately enthralling to him, and he forgot his troubles, just for a bit.

The first school of Essence User was the Channeler. Many initiates were in this school when they began their training. They would draw energy into a crystal, called a focus, and the energy could be stored there for use either by themselves, or others. They would learn the importance of only drawing energy that was spent, and never life energy from the source. Alps was not certain what that meant, but he continued to



read. There were three levels of channeler. The first level was able to pull the energy into a crystal after some training, and could sense energy, see it in their mind, know how much energy was there, and could control how much they drew from either a crystal, or from the air around them. The second level could, after more training, draw energy from a larger variety of situations, instead of just base situations, which Alps understood to be rather extreme, like elation, joy, and ecstasy.

This was a helpful thought to him. It might get tiring to need to bring extreme emotions just to collect energy. So he could get energy if he learned enough from just mildly happy people. The third and final level of channeler was on the level of a priestess. They could channel energy into themselves, instead of just crystals, and draw upon that energy later, becoming more powerful the more energy that was drawn. Alps blinked at that. From what he understood from Lady Kiranna he was apparently already doing this. Was it possible to be a high level channeler and not know it?

He continued to read. The next kind of essence user was a crystal smith. Alps had not really heard anything about this, but discussion with Misty had made him think they had to exist. The crystals, like Shadowfall crystals, did not exist naturally. Their components were harvested, a special type of sand or stone, and the crystals were cut or formed somehow, and inside the crystal, using ones bond with the essence, lines of silver or gold were spread through the willing crystal, whatever that meant, and the crystal was essentially trained to react to any flow of essence by whatever special pattern was imbued into it. Some crystals created light, others had healing properties, and some were even used to enhance pleasure. Very few channelers ever gained the ability to become crystal smiths, and not many priestesses taught the techniques for it as a result. The wrong kind of crystal could be used as a weapon, and this was forbidden for all but those charged with defending the temples. The priestesses with close ties to the spirit world, like Ceriss, generally reserved the right to use those crystals. This was because they were best suited to understand the repercussions to the essence to use it to inflict harm, which should rarely if ever be done. Alps shuddered at the thought of essence itself being used as a weapon. It would likely be an unstoppable kind of force. Blades and armor would be useless against it. No wonder Mannus feared the Letai.

The final school of essence user was called the Guardian. The Guardian did not just draw the essence or build crystals that did tricks. These rare few were often the holders of a nation's destiny itself, it was said. They could bend the essence to their will so intensely that they could produce the effects of powerful crystals without a crystal at all. Banning a weapon crystal from them was pointless because they could do what those crystals could on their own. Alps was immediately captivated. This was what he was talking about. Real strength to protect the ones he loved. What was involved in becoming a Guardian? Could Luna or Ceriss teach him the skills he would use to do this? Alps blushed to think that he could be revered as a Letai at all. The mere name was a legend, but there was little doubt now of what he was, by birth. It made him self-conscious in a very unpleasant way.

"This kind of extreme power..." Alps read as he turned a page, "... was reserved to only the high priestesses. Indeed, it was this ability which earned them the title, but very few could... maintain it... very long. One had to use their own energy, from the source, to actually perform the techniques. This often resulted in a short life span, or at least, a short amount of time one could remain a high priestess." Alps rubbed his chin. Luna was a high priestess. Was she harming herself to have that power? He didn't want to think of that. Alps turned the page. The next page had been half torn out. This was odd, he thought.

"The Nether and the School of the Forbidden Arts..." the slave read out loud. "In some texts written long ago it was stated that before the Letai mixed bloodlines with the first Amanian Empire, when the original Letai first arrived from the ocean..." Alps rubbed his temple. From the ocean? The Letai came to Amani from across the sea? Did this mean there might be an island or a continent with more of them? He looked back to the half-destroyed page. "... these Letai spoke of a forbidden school of essence using that called power from the void, from the darkness, far too powerful and violent to control by all but the most powerful high priestess. This art is not taught, and an attempt to learn it is grounds for execution by the Letai, the only crime in which this is the non-negotiable penalty." Alps swallowed. So this was not something he'd be looking into. "The story spoke of a technique that allowed the user so much power that they could create a world out of the fear and suffering in someone's own mind. It would be a seemingly endless world barren of the things that brought the doomed spirit joy in life. There is no escape from this eternal loneliness."

The white lupine gritted his teeth. He knew what this was referring to. He'd been to that place. The Shadowfall. His reading the page, however, nullified the statement of there being no escape. If it happened again, could he actually get free again, or was it a fluke or happenstance because he had joined with two powerful priestesses?

The rest of the page was missing. His hands suddenly felt cold and numb. Someone had plucked this page out of the book. This very old book. Was he holding the tome that Mannus himself had read to learn of this exact technique? But the rest of the page was gone. He would learn nothing more of it, nor of his inexplicable ability to escape. He looked at the pictures that were on the other page, and saw, with some curiosity, the item he still carried in the leather satchel on his hip. The writing there was in Letai, which Alps could not read, and the image was in color to make it more obviously the item he held. A simple mirror polished metal ball.

Alps had not yet learned what the item was for, though the enigmatic fox had seemed to know. He took the green metal sphere out of his satchel and looked at it. He had taken the item from an Amanian priestess named Vahna, in disguise as Nidaja. The fox had called it Ressaia. An item to be used by a Letai Guardian. Her words rang in his mind now more than before. Now he knew what a Letai Guardian was, and she apparently knew as well. She had said others could not use it because they lacked what it took to give it shape. She said Alps had that, though. What did he have? Bad luck? He looked up from the green sphere and nearly fell out of his chair, jumping up

with the wooden seat clattering on the ground.

“You!” he barked, seeing the fox there. Had she felt him thinking about her? How did she just appear like that?! His mind reeled. What was she doing right in the palace of the Empress; did she have absolutely no fear at all? She stood there before him silently, gazing at him with her silver eyes fixed on him. He looked at her, and then flattened his ears. She let him walk right into this mess. She had to have known the grave danger he was going into and she still did not discourage him. Why was she following him if she was not protecting him? Now he was in too deep to just walk away!

“Me.” The fox’s single-word reply was very certain and non-argumentative.

“What are you doing here?” the slave asked her with a hiss in his voice, trying to be hushed about it. This he genuinely would love to have known, but immediately upon saying it, he knew she would not give a straight answer.

“I was going to ask you the same thing.” Her icy reply gave no hints. “Are you enjoying your greater calling in this land?” she asked. Alps gritted his teeth, staring icily at her.

“Did you *know* what they were going to do to me?” he asked. “Did you know and just let me come anyway?”

“Would it have fixed anything if I had told you?” she asked. The white lupine bristled, which he found himself doing more and more around this fox.

“You have got to be kidding me! I would never have agreed to this!” he barked savagely, not caring now if guards came and arrested this troublesome lady fox. He’d seriously just had his fill of her careless word-wandering in the face of his extreme peril.

“Did you think you ever had a choice?” the dark vixen asked.

“Choice? You could have helped me, right? You could have gotten me out of their clutches and back home to Nita, don’t act like you couldn’t! You got in this place easily enough; we could have knocked out Reika and slipped away!”

“I knocked out Reika. You didn’t run.” Alps took a moment, trying to remember what the fox was talking about, and then vividly recalled Bone sailing through the rain and nailing the hyena in the back of the head.

“You did that?” he asked coldly. “Then why didn’t you come get me and let me know it was a chance to escape.

“You didn’t really want to escape. You wanted to help Reika and keep her from drowning. You missed your chance. I didn’t think you’d go, anyway. I just didn’t want her to stomp on your neck and accidentally kill you.”

“So you saved me, but you didn’t save me?” the wolf asked, very visibly perturbed.

“No, I saved both of you. Reika would have been exiled if she killed you. That is worse than a death sentence to these people. They always end up right in the mines and they don’t live long there.” She noted. Alps gritted his teeth. The mines, getting the materials for Mannus to make more Uruk. He assumed that was a painful and short life, yes. Even the pictures he saw in the books stated that.

“Well, apparently, I am failing at asking the right questions. Otherwise I would not be in this mess. Like you said, I am obviously being somewhat ignorant.” Alps said, trying with grim determination to calm down. Screaming at the fox wasn’t going to undo the mess he’d been pulled into, or help him solve any of his problems. He would try to be more amicable. “I suppose you are well aware of what I’ve been asked to do, and what has been taken from me, whether I wanted it or not. What should I do about that?” he asked.

“What do you want to do about it?” the fox asked in return.

“Stop answering my questions with questions. I want you to just answer me straight. What should I do about what’s happened to me here? I asked you what to do about my friends, who were in danger from who I was, and you told me save them. So I went on this trip willingly, and ended up in this mess because I was looking for the strength and knowledge I thought I would find with the Asuna to help my friends. I thought maybe I could create an ally out of the Asuna, and sure, I might have done that, but I don’t think Nita’s going to enjoy the cost of it. Now, my bloodline will be a part of the Asuna.” Alps sat down heavily, rubbing his head, trying not to tremble. What a mess.

“You seem to have found that undeniable answer for yourself. Allies are a good way to help your friends.” The fox spoke softly in her peaceful, velvet tones. Alps looked up at her with disdain.

“I’ve watched how this place works. I see it in their books, even just in the pictures. Do you know what the Second Child Promise is?” he asked. The fox said nothing. “The second child of every family is taken to the mines when they are of age and worked to death. Every family knows this, and they still have to persist because if they don’t have at least *three* children, their population ultimately begins to shrink, and the Asuna will die out. So every family deals with the pain of sending a beloved child to their unspeakable end just to survive as a race. This is monstrous! What the hell am I supposed to do about that? I don’t want my own flesh and blood seeing that world!” Alps barked furiously. He then lowered his head, holding his muzzle in his palms, looking with distress to the seemingly unmoved vulpine. She finally answered.

“You ask a question I already gave the answer to. Your friends would be safe if

you stop Mannus. If you stop Mannus, the Asuna would be safe too. So save the Asuna.” Alps looked up incredulously at the fox.

“Really? That’s still your answer, just matter-of-fact? Sure, okay. I accept. I will save the Asuna and the Amanians. Now, if you could just help me with the little matter of *how do I do that?!’*” he fairly yelled at the vulpine.

“You already have what you need.” The answer was just as useless to him. He slammed the green sphere on the table.

“What, Ressaia?” he shouted, the fox looking at it.

“No, that’s a weapon, but not enough for Mannus. And certainly not for what comes after. You will need something more.” Alps rolled his eyes. How very valuable, this information.

“Alright, damn it, I have had it. I want you to tell me the most important thing I could ask a question about, don’t hold it back, just the single most important thing I need to know right now!” The wolf pounded his fist on the table, making the books on it hop. The fox got up, slipping around behind Alps, who felt a chill as she put her hands on his shoulder. She did not usually touch him. Was he too forceful with her? Was she going to hurt him? She whispered softly to the wolf.

“Very well, Alps. I will, just this once.” His heart leapt. Finally, real answers! True wisdom from the only one he had started to feel fairly certain could help him in the bigger mess that was really going on. Alps was not sure why, but he felt that she, if anyone, knew how to fix this.

“Thank you.” Alps said quietly, as her cold nose touched the rim of his ear.

“My name is Elis.” Her words were simple and sweet, her tone gentle and soothing. Alps blinked at that.

“Elis?” he asked, turning around. She was gone.

“FUCK! FUCK, FUCK, FUCK!!!” the wolf screamed, jumping up and kicking a chair across the room. It shattered, and ungratefully hurt his foot too, making him hop around. Finally, now that it did no good, someone came in.

“You seem cheerful this afternoon.” Rios said. Alps turned around, suddenly blushing, embarrassed. As far as she could tell, he’d been talking to himself perhaps. Even he wasn’t sure. Luna and Ceriss had seen the fox, but he’d not asked them anything more about her after that, so even he was beginning to wonder about his sanity where “Elis” was concerned. Alps sat on the edge of a table, rubbing his face, almost to tears from the frustration the fox had left him with.

"I'm sorry. It's not... typical for me." He explained to Rios. The wolf-hyena mix sat on the table beside Alps. She looked at the huge, dusty book that he left open, with the half-torn page.

"Doing a little light reading?" she asked, seeing the stack beside it.

"I don't read Asuna." Alps answered sadly. "I don't get much from them, though that one talked a little about Letai techniques. It's got stuff about essence use, like channeling, crystal smiths, that sort of thing.

"Apparently not the things you were looking for. Are you trying to learn something specific? You said you've never been formally trained. My child would be an adult by the time you were ready for some of these techniques, I'm afraid. It's not as easy as just reading about it."

"Why are you trying to help?" Alps asked, knowing full well he'd not get to stay long enough to learn from Rios, but he might well get to learn from Luna, which would be just as good, perhaps. It might even be better, despite Reika seeming to think no one knew more about the Letai.

"Alps..." she leaned forward. "I know you don't like me. For what I did, for what I took from you, but please know that I would never do such a thing if I thought there was, reasonably, another way. I don't want my people to live like this anymore. I'm the last High Asuna. My actions will dictate our future. If I make a single misstep, these books..." she waved her hand around the modest library, "Will be the only thing left. No more spots. No more Asuna. This world will forget, and it will have all been for nothing. I can't let it happen, Alps." Her words were marked with genuine sorrow.

Alps melted somewhat, his earlier rage at Elis subsiding. The Empress seemed to think maybe he was this enraged over her. It was so easy for him to give up being angry. He had not discussed it with Rios, but he'd already learned what she wanted. He wanted to stop this nightmare from happening to her people.

"You mean things like the Second Child Promise?" the wolf asked. Rios gritted her teeth and nodded. "I can imagine there's worse but I don't feel like asking about it right now." He put his hands on the edge of the table, leaning forward.

"What are you searching for, Alps?" Rios asked. It sounded hauntingly similar to the kind of question Elis would ask. Everyone wanted to know, but he seemed to be the least concerned about it. Without thinking, he answered.

"Happiness." His single word was so much surer than most of the things Alps had said the past few days. Rios was quiet a moment. Alps was a little shocked by the simplicity and genuine truth of his answer as well.

"I took you away from that." Her words were a little sullen.

"I don't mean my own." Alps said genuinely.

"You are looking for happiness for your friends? Your mate-to-be?" she asked.

"It's more than that. I feel it stronger now than ever before. I suppose if I needed much proof that I am what I am so afraid I am, this feeling is that proof." Alps felt like his explanation was far too complicated and cryptic to be understandable, but Rios surprised him with her own answer.

"You want to make everyone happy." The wolf hung his head and nodded a little. "Even the loathsome Asuna?" she asked.

"Especially the loathsome Asuna." He offered this with a chuckle. "I thought I would be able to just walk away from it all, and go back to my happy home in Diera, and just... push it all to the back of my mind. Maybe I would not even tell Nita that part of me lives on among you."

"No one's asking you to do anything but that, Alps. You can go back and you can pretend it never even happened. It may be a century or more before Mannus makes it to your lands, and you would have enjoyed a happy life and brought joy to those around you, and that will satisfy any Letai, I've been told." Rios leaned against Alps, who found it endearing, and a little unusual as she'd not shown genuine affection for the wolf even in the few times he'd flooded her with the promise of his progeny. She would hardly even look him in the face while having him perform the task. This was a little more genuinely affectionate version of Rios he'd not seen before.

"I thought I could do just that, but I see the suffering you endure now. You all try hard to hide it, not to talk about it, and you bear a culture of strength, where showing that you suffer is a taboo, but I still see it. I don't know how I see it, but it's like a dark blanket that hangs over so many of you, like..." he rubbed his head.

"Like a mourner's shroud." Rios' answer came in a soft whisper.

"Yes..." Alps mused softly. "Exactly like that."

"Alps... come to the window..." Rios offered her hand. The wolf looked at her curiously, but took her hand and moved to the first-floor window, looking at the courtyard. It had stopped raining, and there were a number of Asuna out and about, gathering some things from the market not far away to bring them back to their homes or to the palace. Alps looked at them curiously.

"Looks like it stopped raining for a bit." He noted matter-of-factly, not sure what else to say.

"Who wears the shroud?" Rios asked.

“What?” Alps asked in return.

“Who, out there, is wearing the shroud you spoke of? Who has that darkness draped over them?” Her words were somewhat insistent. The slave tilted his head in confusion.

“I was being figurative.” Alps gestured to the folks milling about. “I don’t see actual shrouds.” Rios moved behind Alps, leaning over his shoulder as she looked out the window with him. Again, she was being affectionately close. The wolf cursed himself for liking it.

“But you do see them, Alps. You just described them. You have seen them since you got here. The imagery was there, and very real, Alps. I don’t want you to be as literal.” Her hand slipped under his chin, rubbing soothingly. “That’s like my asking you what music looked like. It’s the wrong sense, but imagery works different altogether, doesn’t it? If I asked you what spring time music might sound like, you could choose it, even if the music was played in the autumn. We make images in our mind for how things are, outside of our regular senses. How we see the world is not how we understand it, right? So use your imagery, Alps. If there are people out there that you think would wear that shroud that’s in your mind... who is wearing one?”

Alps could not help but wag his tail a little. Was this a lesson? She was teaching him something elementary, and he suddenly felt like this was far more important than she was even immediately letting on. So he looked out at those souls wandering the courtyard. Some of them seemed emotionless, just going about their business. Some seemed to be happy because it wasn’t raining. A few were idly chatting with one another, and a couple were even arguing, one pair of them almost coming to blows, which Alps found to be a rather common occurrence. As he watched them though, he tried hard to imagine who met the description in his mind. Which of them was being pressed under that black ... what was it? A shroud? A sheet? A mass? And then, he rubbed his eyes a bit, and Rios held him a little tighter. He could see a flicker, like a fleeting shadow one sees when they are sick or overtired. Not see, maybe understand. It was weird. It was like he was imagining it. It seemed like one of the ones he was looking intently at was suddenly wrapped in a dark layer of smoke, over his chest and shoulders, like a closed tunic or vest. Alps pointed.

“That one. He is wearing it.” Alps spoke softly.

“Anyone else?” Rios asked.

“Her... and that kid over there, the one that’s pulling the cart with his folks.” Alps pointed the two out, and as he looked his focus would move from one person whose smoky garment would fade, and the one he looked at would gain it. As his focus settled, his mind “looking” for that image, he would actually see it in a flickering, unnatural kind of way, as if he were tricking his mind into an illusion.



“Do you see them, or are you just imagining that they are the type to have them?” Rios asked.

“At first, I was just imagining, but if I focus on them...”

“They get a smoky little jacket...” Rios finished. Alps turned, looking at Rios incredulously, his jaw slacked, a little startled at her accurate description.

“What is it?” Alps asked.

“Alps, that’s the essence. That’s their essence, as it’s manifesting itself.”

“Is everyone’s like that?” he asked, knowing that not everyone he looked at had the smoky vestment. Did they not have it or was he missing it?

“No. Just those who are suffering terribly. Those who feel utterly hopeless.” Her words sounded so eerie as she said that. Alps was suddenly not so sure he wanted to have the ability to see that.

“Why would I want to know how to see suffering? I can just tell some of these people are unhappy without seeing that scary shroud.” He leaned against the window frame again.

“The Letai honed this ability because they wanted to bring happiness to those around them. It’s important to know who is suffering because those are the people who are the most in need of finding happiness. Ending their suffering is crucial to the development of a Letai’s power. Suffering is the cause of more suffering. The Letai would ease all suffering as best they could to prevent greater suffering from leading to things like war. Death. Destruction. Those things damage the essence of a place. They poison it. It takes a lot of work to restore the essence of a place after a war.” Alps looked at the folks in the courtyard. One of the children happily playing with his friends wore a shroud, while someone who was glum and trying to repair a cart that had just snapped didn’t seem to have one. Something was wrong with the child, and without that ability, he might not know. He might suspect the real suffering to be with the person who was obviously not having a very happy time with his property.

“So many of them are suffering. Do you see them too?” he asked.

“I do.” Rios answered softly. “Every day.”

“Is this the first step to becoming a channeler then? Seeing the essence?” he asked.

“No, Alps. It’s one of the last steps. You say you have never been trained, but this took me six years to be able to see the essence. You have the ability, Alps, you

just need... to understand what it is you are doing naturally. You see, but you don't know what you see, and perhaps you have been trained to ignore it just to fit in. Because they were things others could not see." Rios held the lupine from behind. He felt warm suddenly. He leaned back into her.

"That feels better. Seeing them, seeing their suffering, is sad. It helps to have someone to hold." Alps whispered this, knowing that it was likely why Rios did this. Was she always this kind? Did he ignore it before because of what she had to do to him? The slave cupped her hand against his tummy with his own. She moved it up in front of him.

"That's my own warmth, Alps. I want you to think of what my warmth might look like if I held it in my hand. What comfort might actually look like if you imagined it before you, as I gave it to you? You can feel it, sure enough, but can you find it?" she asked.

"Comfort?" Alps asked, and then looked carefully at that hand over his chest, held in front of him with her palm facing him. He focused on it with the same "drifting" feeling he used to see the cloaks, not knowing what it had to do with his eyes, but he now recognized the feeling he had when he did it, and could make himself "feel" that way again. It took but a moment, but he was able to see a wisp of golden smoky haze caressing his chest, like it was licking right over his body, from his tummy to his neck. He blushed a little, suddenly feeling very much like she was licking him. The wolf whispered softly,

"I imagine it to be like... a silky scarf or something that you hold out, and it strokes over my front, up and down, slowly." Alps tilted his head back. It felt nice, and he felt his heart racing not from the embarrassment of the sensation, but from the feeling that he was finally learning something of value.

"Tell me when it's up at your neck, and tell me when it's down at your tummy..." Rios continued to hold Alps from behind as she spoke. Alps nodded, but the warm feeling ended. He continued to watch, but the "scarf" was no longer actually touching him, it was just making the same sweeping motion inches from him. He didn't feel as happy, but he could still tell her what he saw.

"Up... Down... Up... Still up... Down..." he continued this for a while, until she finally let that scarf touch him again, and he felt mushy and happy again, not wanting it to stop. Alps wondered if she would teach him the scarf trick. He was sure Nita would adore the way this felt after a hard day of dealing with snippy merchant companies and land owners with unsolvable gripes.

"I know without a doubt that you do see it, then, Alps." Rios said softly.

"I dunno... Maybe I would have always seen it, I just would not have looked for it? It's like seeing shapes in the clouds. You can see a cloud, but you have to imagine it looking like something to see something else." he noted. Rios let go of Alps and

walked back over to the table, sitting on the edge of it. She picked up the book Alps was looking through, just leafing through the pages. Alps stood behind her, and thought about that scarf she'd used on him.

The wolf imagined a "scarf" of his own, holding it in his hands, a streamer of golden energy. It was not as easy as just imagining it, so he focused more on where it was from. He tried to reach in him to find that feeling again, to see his own energy. It came from the same energy that he already felt. It wasn't too different from everyone else's was it? He tried to feel that same warm feeling, and fashion it into a scarf. One doesn't start with a scarf, after all. One makes it from the materials you have. He saw the golden wisp extend from his fingertips, faint, but coalescing slowly. It only extended a few inches from his fingers as Rios looked through the book.

"There are some helpful things in this book. It's a rare book with some very interesting wisdom for advanced Letai. I think, to show my intentions to bring peace between our people, I should let you borrow this book. It's something that your scholars would treasure forever." She then gasped, arching her back as Alps slid the golden energy of his scarf up her spine. The wolf wagged his tail to see it had an effect. He did it! It was actually pretty easy when he got it started. He stroked Rios with it for a while, and she held still, facing away from him, her fluffy tail bouncing back and forth in jerky motions. When he stopped, she slumped, hugging her middle.

"Err..." Alps circled around to the front of the table. "Did I do it wrong? Did that hurt?" he asked, gritting his teeth. He was focusing on exactly what it felt like to him when she used it on him. She shook her head, but looked almost frightened if Alps had to label the expression as anything.

"Alps, that's not a 'see it once and do it' technique. You show unusual predisposition to using these essence techniques. You have to know the third school to be able to do that. It's not a toy, be careful. You can hurt someone if you push a dark feeling into that. You want it to feel nice, but Alps, you can make it hurt just as easily." The slave widened his eyes at that. Was that actually how it worked? It took all his focus and effort to get it a few inches from his fingertips, but if he could touch someone with the intent to harm them, he could actually do it? He was a little afraid of that thought. He nodded and stopped focusing on the idea of it. He definitely hoped the priestess could help with his education when he got back. He stood in front of the empress, tilting his head.

"Do you think I could become strong enough to stop Mannus?" he asked. Since Elis had said it, that thought was weighing more and more on his mind.

"What?" Rios asked, looking at him incredulously.

"This has to end. My friends are suffering. Your friends are suffering. How long are we going to let him do this? What if we have the power to stop him?" Alps asked.

"You say this like no one's ever tried. The fully trained Letai numbered in the hundreds, and could not face him and stop him, and that was before his army was even half the size it is now. He gets stronger and stronger, and his range spreads, almost all the way to the coast now, so I hear. You or I alone won't stop him. Making a new force of Letai, and hitting him when he doesn't expect it, right at the heart, right in his own citadel. We have to bypass his army in secret and hit him with everything we've got, but that might be a hundred years away." Rios leaned back a bit. Alps nodded to that.

"So that's your plan. Build a secret purified race to face him? Something he doesn't expect?" Alps asked.

"That's pretty much the idea. Obviously I have no trouble telling you about it. Mannus would want you dead more than anyone. You are hardly an ideal spy for him." Rios smiled wryly.

"You mentioned bringing peace to our two peoples?" he asked.

"We cannot succeed alone. The new blood would have to stay out of Mannus' reach until they are ready, and that's well inside the queen's territory. And then, what would we have to look forward to when Mannus was gone? War with your people? Certainly not. That's not acceptable at all. There has to be peace. I will speak with your queen one day, but there is much work to do before we come to that point. I won't ask you to do this task either. I've taken enough from you as it is, and your kindness and inherent trust may cause the queen to question the sincerity of any promise I make to you. But there will be peace. There is no other way."

These words made Alps feel a lot better. Something good may yet come of this, even if Rios' plan did not work. The wolf would trust Rios to her end of things, but he was not content to do nothing. There had to be something more. Something that did not take one hundred years to do. That odd silver-haired fox, Elis, had told him to save them. His people and hers. Somehow, he had trouble believing that she did not mean it. There was a frantic tap at the door, which then swung open.

"Brother's back." Reika barked with agitation. "She brought company." Alps looked at the annoyed-looking hyena, who was followed by someone Alps only barely recognized. It was the male hyena that Nidaja had been fighting with when he was separated from them. That seemed like months ago, even if it had only been a little over a week. So many things had happened, and so much had changed about his already increasingly complicated life. Alps did not expect the next face he saw. His heart leapt.

Nidaja. She strode in wearing her leather armor, looking every bit as beautiful and powerful as she did when she first took him from the little town of Luca. Alps stood up, near tears with happiness. It was like home came right to him instead of him having to go home, and he didn't feel as fearful and alone anymore. He then flattened his ears. What was she doing in the palace? Was she taken prisoner by the hyena? His head

then jerked to look at Rios. She would probably not have expected to see Nidaja either. By the look on her face, silently stunned, she did not.

"We ... were not supposed to take her entire family, Lyat." Rios said shakily.

"She kidnapped me." Lyat answered. Alps softened a bit. Of course. Nidaja wasn't so weak as to be kidnapped. But what was going on?

"If you thought she meant me harm, you'd be dead rather than standing here. Don't be silly with me, Lyat, you took the Amanian General right to the palace. Why?" she asked.

"She insisted." Lyat said, shrugging. Alps covered his muzzle. Had Nidaja just done something so dangerous for him?

"Oh dear." Rios said.

"I'll get bone." Reika said flatly.

"No, it's alright." The Empress said, Alps looking back and forth between them.

"Reika, Nidaja isn't as soft as me." Alps stated.

"Reika uses bone on Lyat." The lady hyena said shortly.

"Alps, am I too late to keep her from..." Nidaja started. Alps looked away, rubbing his muzzle. He didn't want to talk about this right now. Not in front of everyone.

"Lyat, you did to tell her about that. Please say you were not so foolish." The Empress said with a slight squeak of fear in her voice. "I thought I expressed how very secret everything about this notion was."

"Then it's done..." Nidaja said, her voice wilting. Alps walked over to the window. He couldn't look at her. He didn't exactly do a whole lot to stop it.

"Lady Nidaja, he came here of his free will. His eyes are open, and he knows what we do is to protect ourselves, to save ourselves. Even as important as Alps is, this is bigger than him. You have to un-"

"Enough!" Nidaja barked, cutting Rios off mid-sentence. Alps turned around quickly. He did not want them to fight! Nidaja strode to Alps, and pulled him forward, kissing him. The wolf was startled, but soon melted into the kiss. Reika murmured softly,

"Told you so." Alps closed his eyes and sighed. It was not judgmental. It did not demand anything from him. She was filled with joy just to see him. The slave

embraced the one who came across the wilds just to save him again. He finally leaned back, tears in his eyes, so fearful that his actions here had messed everything up and disappointed not just Nidaja, but hurt her sister.

"I... I'm sorry, Nidaja..." he said with a slight crackle in his tensing throat.

"Alps, just tell me... Do you believe they did what they really believed was right? Do you believe that Rios wants something better for her people, and in return, for all who are against Mannus?" Nidaja's words were very bold and confident. The white lupine gritted his teeth. That was a very odd question to ask him. Was she asking if he wanted it to happen? Not exactly, but he was no longer so upset that it did. He understood why now. He sympathized with the Asuna.

"I believe she wants peace and prosperity for both of our people." Alps finally answered, not sure how to bring his own feelings into it. Nidaja looked over to the stunned and silent Rios.

"Is it true? You are part Letai, and Alps is full Letai? Are you able to tell without a doubt?" she asked.

"I had some doubt before I met him. I do not now. He is Letai." Rios said.

"And you intend to tap his bloodline to bring stability to your empire, as Lyat said?" the green-furred general asked. Rios nodded to that.

"That would be the idea." The empress spoke evenly and properly.

"Did she hurt you?" Nidaja asked Alps.

"No." Alps said, glad that she wasn't asking about Reika.

"Alps, do not fret. My sister will understand. She knows what's at stake, but what this reveals about you will make keeping you close to her out in the open difficult." Alps felt a bolt of pain go through his heart. He knew of course. It would be too dangerous for the queen to be openly married to someone who Mannus even suspected might be Letai.

"If he realized what Alps was, he'd suspect the queen of using him for exactly what we needed him for." Rios said softly.

"To purify her bloodline and challenge him." Nidaja finished. Alps swallowed. He had not considered that it might work the same way for the emerald tribe, perhaps even more so.

"So what can we do?" Alps asked.

"The wedding may have to wait, or just be a private affair, a close secret if Nita cannot endure, but it only changes how things look, not how they are." Nidaja explained.

"What of my legacy here?" Alps asked, almost afraid of this part more than any other. "How will Nita react to what I have done here?"

"With what options lay before us, for the Asuna especially, did you think it was a choice that you were allowed to make?" Nidaja asked. This surprised Alps greatly. She would have supported the Asuna not giving him a choice?

"No, I suppose not. This was too important for me to say no to." The wolf spoke in a near whisper. Of course he understood that now, but he really didn't expect Nidaja to understand. She loathed the Asuna, didn't she? Would she even be able to touch him knowing he'd been with one? She had kissed him though...

"Moreover, there are happier things to discuss than whether this was all entirely right or wrong." The general stood taller, facing Rios.

"A lasting peace." Rios said. Alps' heart soared again. They would actually speak of it openly? What has Nidaja seen on her way here? Had her eyes been so keen to see that the Asuna were Mannus' worst victims? He sat down in a chair with the back of it hugged to his chest, enthralled.

"Yes. If the bloodline of what is to be the royal house is to mix with the Empress of the Asuna, then the essence would forbid either to spill the blood of the other." Nidaja said.

"You are wise to know this rule. I am happy to see that the laws of the Letai are not lost in the royal house." Rios said. "It will not be easy, as many of my people have no inkling as to a reason why a peace would have to exist. It may be a more complicated endeavor than you getting here safely and making this agreement with me. Not everyone sees the world that *could* be like you or I do." Alps marveled between them. He'd seen the rebel group, the Spirits of Silverlight, reconcile their differences with Nita and Nidaja in his presence as well, but this was much bigger. The Spirits of Silverlight were a rag-tag group of farmers and miners who wanted to defend their land without the queen's help. This was an entire empire on the brink of war with his homeland about to end that conflict. He felt dizzy from the weight of importance upon the moment.

"I would be foolish to ignore the change it would mean for both our people to face the enemy together, even if in secret, unwitting to the cooperation of the other. There is too much to lose any other way." Nidaja said with deep conviction. Alps spotted Reika's tail wagging. This pleased her. Nidaja and Rios were recognizing each other's strength. That was important.

"I wish for you to forgive me for forcing my intentions upon your friend and lover

in these past days. You may understand, but it does not make right the things I have done.” Rios said.

“I understand Lyat to be your friend and lover as well.” Nidaja said calmly.

“This is...” she looked side-long and suspiciously at Lyat. “... Not a publicly known arrangement, but yes. You speak true. Who else would I trust so much?” Rios looked at Lyat, who looked down, hands behind him, trying to look invisible. “What does that have to do with Alps?” the Empress asked.

“I can forgive your trespasses if you can forgive mine.” Nidaja said. Rios’ eyes went wide, though she tried to absorb the look of shock as best she could quickly. Reika was not so tactful.

“You is fucking joking.” came her guttural proclamation.

“I see...” Rios said, seeming a bit shaken, and then, a chuckle, and then, a laugh. A long, hard laugh. She sat beside Alps, who Nidaja now stood beside, arm looped over his shoulder. She leaned on the table, laughing.

“What is being funny? Lyat is getting watered by ferns. Is weird, not funny.” Reika seemed clueless and indignant. Alps understood the significance, but he was very surprised that such a thing would happen. He knew quite well, even in a few days of discussing it, how Nidaja felt about the Asuna. Perhaps Lyat had been very good at explaining the way things really were to her. Or perhaps Nidaja had done so to prove her strength, which seemed to be how things worked between the Asuna anyway.

“I’ll have to mark him as mine again later.” Rios said, touching Lyat on the nose, making him obviously a little flustered. Reika left, blanching visibly at the thought. Alps rubbed his chin. That calm, ordered and regal male was actually Reika’s brother? He barely saw the resemblance, aside from the coloring. The slave looked back at Nidaja.

“Well, I was worried that you might have reservations about me after being so intimate with an Asuna, but...” he rubbed the back of his head, looking with uncertainty at Lyat. He was shared so openly between Nidaja and her friends and family that the thought of another enjoying her didn’t make him jealous at all. It seemed perfectly natural to him. He was openly loved and knew to love openly. Was this something he was supposed to feel? Nidaja chuckled and murmured,

“Alps, my feelings about the Asuna were misguided by decades of hate based on a situation that Mannus intended. He wants anything but an alliance between our people. Separate we are far weaker. And in learning to forgive Lyat and the Asuna, I found out where my real strength lies. Things will get better, Alps. We are all on the shore of a new world, watching the dawn. There’s a lot of work to be done, but the right people are in place to do it.” She said. Rios put an arm over Nidaja’s shoulders, and Nidaja placed hers around Alps. Lyat rubbed the back of his head.



"This is being quite... a lot. It is looked so much less intense in fanciful day-dreamy discussion." The male Asuna smiled though. Alps looked up to Nidaja and then to Rios, and murmured softly,

"I'm still afraid. Everything is so uncertain." He had to be honest with them, even as excited as everyone seemed.

"Admitting fear shows wisdom." Rios said softly.

"Reika would say it showed weakness." Alps replied.

"That's because she's not strong enough to admit her fear yet." Rios said coldly. Lyat winced, and Alps looked down. He could not argue the logic. In the times of his greatest fear, he'd often refused to admit that he was even afraid. Even Reika would have to face this darkness with them. They were going to be in this together. Alps looked out the window at the dark courtyard. The sun was setting. It was raining again. It would only get darker.

So why was he so happy?

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The light in the palace bedroom flickered eerily. These rooms had candles more prevalently than the oil lanterns in the castle that Alps called home, so it seemed darker and spookier even if the quality of the bed was not so different. The wolf looked up with a contented expression at Nidaja as she removed her armor. It would be the first night in far too long that the wolf spent in the arms of this lupine general that he had learned real love and trust from. He was looking forward to this more than he was telling her, especially because of how affectionate she had been with him, touching, stroking, and soothing during dinner. It had been a private affair, as the nature of Nidaja's visit to the castle was being kept a secret, but only a little was discussed concerning the logistics of the secret alliance.

They both agreed that a neutral meeting place and less ears and eyes would be needed, so the bulk of the conversations were stories from Nidaja's youth, and the somewhat eccentric questions from Reika, who was inexplicably interested in everything Nidaja was talking about. Alps suspected it was because her brother was equally inexplicably fond of Nidaja, and she was trying to figure out if she was a danger to her family. The white lupine hoped that Reika did not decide she was dangerous. At least, in as much as Nidaja did not intend to take her brother away. She might very well have had some fun with the hyena, but she'd hardly just taken a mate.

Alps had taken a short bath with Nidaja, scrubbing her down, and gratefully

getting a very thorough scrubbing from her. They both smelled of lavender shampoo, which was all that the palace seemed to have. Neither minded. Alps still had the scent of hyena on his fur and Nidaja smelled like hot, wet leather from her travels. It was a nice change. The general returned to the bed after drawing the curtains and blowing out the far candles, leaving only the portable one on the night table lit. She slipped out of her robes, baring herself to the already bare wolf.

"It's been far too long." Alps stated softly, his ears folding back as he held his arms out to welcome Nidaja to him.

"Too long since we've been together, Alps?" Nidaja asked, smiling wryly. "It's been like... a week. We've gone much longer than that just loving together in the castle." She laughed.

"Having Reika for company is like being without civilized, refined folk for months." The white slave chuckled. He pulled Nidaja close as she gave him her hands. The wolf drew her down to the bed, looking at her equally violet eyes as she smiled back up at him, stroking his face. He took a moment to think this time, however, as he looked into them. Of course, he took precautions with his friends because he entirely expected that if they were in their mother's moon, they'd be expecting soon enough. They didn't want that yet for the complications that would cause, obviously, but would that change now they knew he was Letai? Nita might be a lot more insistent, at least, in being a mother. Just as he was purifying a bloodline for the Asuna, he'd be doing the same for the Amanians. Nita's children would be more powerful. Even Nidaja would perhaps want her children to be stronger. Would Nita find herself having to make such concessions to other Letai as Alps freed them because there were no male Letai for them to pair off with? He blushed a bit at that thought. He could certainly request to Nita that such things not be allowed and she would protect him from that extreme complication of his life, but how selfish would that make him, especially if that was all they asked for? He would discuss that. Later. For now, he was concerned with something very simple and very much something *he* wanted.

"She was rough with you then? Should I challenge her? She seems to be building some respect for me." Nidaja stated, her hands sliding over Alps' chest as he loomed over her naked form, gazing at her perfect, round bosom. Alps lowered his head and kissed her chest softly, savoring the feel of her fingers lacing behind his ears. He was exactly where he wanted to be. He spoke softly, his breath wafting over the sweet scented velvety fur before him.

"I think she's inspecting you carefully in case she wants to challenge you because she feels you are not Asuna enough for her brother." Alps laughed a bit at this, knowing, from how Reika was very imperialistic and proud, that her brother playing with Nidaja would be a real splinter in her foot. Nidaja looked up at her lupine lover curiously for a moment, and then smiled, before saying softly,

"You aren't really jealous, are you? I had wondered if you might be, but you

really aren't. Why is that I wonder?" she asked. Alps seemed to ponder, but he pondered with both hands rolling her heavy, beautiful breasts as his hips slipped in between her own, his already firming member stroking over her velvety lips. There would not be much in the way of foreplay this time. They both needed this and there could be no denying it, even as they spoke, their bodies made it happen. Alps finally answered after thinking about it a bit himself.

"I guess I am not used to having claim on anything, so that would not be my natural and immediate reaction, no." He stroked Nidaja's face, forcing himself to think about that more. What if she took Lyat home and had him whenever she wanted him? Alps could not imagine that he'd suddenly not see Nidaja's affection again, and even if they didn't have time to lie together anymore, he'd still have her friendship, he was certain, for life. He added to his consensus, "... besides, my being replaced in bed once in a while doesn't mean that I'm out of your heart. No more than my spending time with Nita, Misty, Uri, or Misha puts you out of mine..." and with that, the slave's hips pushed forward, and a hot, happy squeak was pushed out of his lover as her honeypot yielded to his sexual desire, spreading around his now quite firm flesh. Alps tilted his head back in pleasure as he felt that slick, creamy stroke of her inner flesh as she engulfed him in that powerful push of his hips.

Alps bristled a bit, his muscles quivering as he strained to push himself as deeply into the now more deeply breathing general as he could. He wanted to fill her, to fulfill her, to please her in every way in thanks for braving the dangerous journey to come and get him. He didn't know what tomorrow might hold, but at least he could face it with her. He was not alone. He began, at that point, to feel that maybe he'd never have to worry about being alone. His friends would be in danger, yes, but as Elis had said, they would still face danger without him. He'd face it with them, instead of hiding and hoping his absence gave them a better chance. In Nidaja's embrace, this was even easier to understand for him.

Alps reared back, pulling Nidaja's legs up a bit to hold them against his sides, letting her lie there before him, sprawled out beautifully, her ponytail resting over her shoulder, making her seem so casual about the sexual congress she was now enjoying. Alps decided to try to do what he'd intended with Nita, but felt perhaps testing it first would be prudent. As his hips slowly rolled back and forth, giving him a nicely graphic view of his cock pushing in and out of those straining, wide pink lips which suckled upon him so delightfully, he placed one hand on Nidaja's tummy, just below her navel. She looked at the slave curiously.

"Mmmmn... you are being so very deliberate this evening, love. This is nice." Her crooning voice only further delighted the wolf. He focused his energy into his hands as he had done for Rios, focusing not on just the pleasant warmth she had shown him, but on the warmth that Nidaja gave him, sharing his love of her with her. To tell her that he loved her was one thing, but to actually touch her with that feeling, he felt, would magnify his intentions when he said it. He let that energy spill into her from her fingertips as he whispered softly,

"I adore you, Lady Nidaja. You are one of my dearest friends, and I intend to take good care of you for as long as this world will allow." As his words ended and he felt the energy finally 'connect' with her, the wolf general arched her back heavily, and in a sinking groan, Alps was shocked by the sensation of a spasming in her sex as she climaxed almost instantly. Alps continued to feed her that energy, grinning mirthfully. This was perhaps too much for her to handle, he thought, but what a nice way to punctuate what he was saying.

"Hunff! Hurf! Haahah!" Nidaja pitched desperately, startled, it seemed, but riding her climax with reckless abandon as she bucked enough against him that he didn't have to move at all while she worked her squeezing, soaking sex. This was not something Alps was used to with Nidaja. She was essentially helpless to him. He pulled his hand away, and she immediately calmed down.

"Whuuuh.." she panted raggedly, looking up at her lover with bleary, happy eyes, "What was that? I felt so..."

"You deserve every bit of it." Alps said, putting his hand back on her, lighting Nidaja's fires again instantly, getting that same sinking groan out of her as her hips rose and fell against him. She could not help but buck back against him as that energy spilled through her. Alps grinned joyfully, having to keep himself from laughing in his glee at getting to do this with the pretty lupine general. It was a lot of power to have, and he was sure that this time she was aware he was actually doing something, her eyes widened. She rode out the pleasure, which seemed short of a climax now that she'd already been pushed over the edge. Alps removed his hand again, and resumed happily pumping her himself, watching his slick, pink member slip in deeply back and forth.

"Alps... what are you doing... to make that happen.. You've never... uhhhuh..." The general panted out, still having plenty of pleasure to contend with as he resumed his happy thrusting into her suckling depths. Alps closed his eyes a little, giving a soft groan himself. The effect of having this control, and pleasuring Nidaja so much was making it harder for him to stave off his own climax. He didn't want to put it off. He wanted to blow his essence hard inside her to remind himself where it belonged. He lurched harder, panting out his answer to his green-furred lover.

"You didn't think I came away..." he pushed hard into Nidaja, making her squeak hotly, "... came away from all of this without learning at least a little about what the Letai could do?" he grinned mirthfully again at his lover before putting his hand on her tummy, and making her cry out again. She bucked hard into him, obviously erupting again, her eyes pinned shut as her ears folded back, her tightly trembling body rushing with heavy sensations of pleasure. Alps leaned over her, huffing hotly. "Yes, love... keep it up... Keep moving... I'll cum... Please make me cum. I need you so much... Mmnnh..." he folded his own ears back. He kept his hand on her tummy. If she kept moving like that, that's all it would take! She was so tight around him, and he could swear he could feel

some of those waves of pleasure contacting him as well, stoking his own fires faster.

The wet sloppy sounds of her sex slapping his groin only intensified as she worked herself into a frenzy against him again so easily, catapulting herself into another climax, and then slowing only a bit, before renewing her vigor, very obviously wanting to make her lover spill his essence for her just as he so desired.

“This is... an essence ability?” Nidaja huffed loudly, lurching back at Alps heavily, following his instructions, even if she were able to help it after that second climax ebbed. It was all happening so fast. They could be at this all night as far as the happy slave was concerned. She could wake up with his hands on her spilling his intent of pleasure into her. “Alps, this is...” she bolted again as Alps let her feel the first splash of his hot seed inside her, the wolf barking out as his body jerked, and he spasmed heavily, finally taking his hand off her tummy, ending that flow of energy as he exploded inside her. He could not focus on that while he was so close to climax, and especially not as he truly burst inside the writhing general!

“I’m cumming!” the wolf piped out happily, his head down, his teeth bared with the searing waves of joy that coursed through him at the same time. He opened his eyes, hazily, and could actually almost see a shape of greenish haze around Nidaja as she squealed in delight. Was that essence as well, or was he just a little over-assuming in the promise of his new abilities. Still, as he watched, that energy seemed to rise from her like smoke, and cling to him, as if it were a silk curtain attracted to him by static because he’d shuffled his feet on the carpet on a cold day. Was he drawing the energy without even knowing it? Had he always done it? Had he stored up so much energy from his lovers and friends that it allowed him to escape the Shadowfall?

Alps slumped happily, holding his squirming general under him as she panted happily, not caring very much about that now. So what if it came natural. His friends loved him for it anyway, and it surely wasn’t *why* he was doing it, after all. He looked up at Nidaja, who panted weakly, but seemed quite happy, even with his still pulsing shaft inside her. The wolf grinned at the lady general and slid back, spilling his own seed a bit as he withdrew from her, and stroked her with his hand, still flooding her with energy, but focusing more on that more maternal warmth that Rios had used on him. Was it different in its effect? Would he need to take time to learn many different kinds of touches for his friends.

“Oh that’s just so...” Nidaja groaned as Alps stroked her tummy and chest.

“Warm and comforting?” Alps asked, to verify. He remembered very well what it felt like.

“Who taught you this?” the general asked.

“Rios.” The slave’s answer made the general open her eyes a bit.

"You were learning essence techniques from her? That seems... mmmnn.... Industrious of you, given the situation." The general stretched out, obviously relishing the attention. Alps stretched out alongside Nidaja and cuddled in against her side, having satisfied himself more than merely in sexual release. He had enjoyed the very deep satisfaction of making Nidaja understand what she meant to him by letting her actually feel his joy. He relished the thought of just getting to do that for any of his friends.

"I won't pass up the chance to learn the things I could use to help you and Nita. I want to become stronger, whether by fighting alongside you or taking lessons for essence use from the priestesses. We will go through a lot together, and I am not going to shy away from it." Alps explained. Nidaja smiled wryly.

"Thank you Alps..." she looked away thoughtfully, and then took a rather puzzled expression. "What the hell is that thing?" she asked. Alps looked in the same direction she was looking, and then gritted his teeth. Placed behind a chair, propped up in a corner, was Reika's bone club.

"That would be Reika's partner, Bone." Alps groaned. He pulled himself out of bed and stumbled over to it. He picked up the bone club and looked into its ridiculous-looking googly eyes. He shook Bone a little to make the feather "head-dress" whiffle a bit.

"Why did she leave that in our room?" Nidaja said, sitting up and pulling the blanket in front of her a little. "It's kind of creepy-looking."

"She thinks it's alive, actually. She talks to it all the time." Alps said softly.

"That's kind of insane." Nidaja said. "I am surprised that Rios would allow someone who is obviously so unstable to assist in a mission so important." Alps looked carefully into the painted on eyes of the bone-club. Its "face" was blank and unfeeling. Only a slight line had been added as a mouth to make him devoid of an intelligent expression. Alps held it with both hands a moment, thinking about the conversation Reika had with Bone in the rain, concerning Elis.

"I dunno... If you understood just how ... well she understood this thing, you might find it even spookier. I am not so sure she can't at least see a little through it." Alps said softly.

"Wait... so you mean she was watching us through it?" The general pulled the covers up a little more.

"Not so much like that, since she doesn't seem to always agree with the club, but she seems to be able to understand its experiences. Like, I suspect when she gets this back, she'll ask what he saw. It would be pretty useful for spying."

“Yeah, that doesn’t make me feel much better. Put it outside the door.” Nidaja said, pointing.

“I don’t want someone else to come along and take it. She’d be furious. You don’t want to see Reika angry, believe me.” Alps said. “I will tuck him in my pack for now where he can’t see anything else.” The white slave did so, stowing away the bone club, at least the head of it, so it’s staring eyes would not bother his lover more. He walked away, turning to look at it. He could swear, just for a moment, when he was talking about it as a thing that could see, he saw a flicker of white essence energy. Only living things gave off that energy, though, from what he knew, so he felt that it was an illusion of his sex-addled mind. A long, happy sleep with Nidaja would do a world of good for him, and tomorrow, they could plan what they intended to do next.

## Sirius, Book III

### *The Essence*

*Comments or Questions?*

Contact Alps: [sarsis@gmail.com](mailto:sarsis@gmail.com)

Or just drop a note at: <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/sarsis/>

## Chapter 13

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Rain continued to hammer down outside, delaying Alps and Nidaja's departure yet another day. The low-hanging grey clouds seemed to have no intention of allowing a single hour of sunshine through. There were moments where it seemed the skies would clear up, and then that moment would end abruptly in another torrential downpour where one could not see a hundred feet ahead of them. Nidaja had told Rios that she did not mind traveling in the rain, but the empress had advised against it, as the Uruk, she said, had even less trouble walking in the rain. If Alps and the general could not see more than a few dozen feet at times, by the time they saw a roving party of enemy golems it would be too late. The lady Amanian general reluctantly agreed that it would be better to wait out the rains. Nita would worry, as by now she would certainly have been told by Neit what had happened in Jalana, and perhaps fear the worst. That only made it more imperative to make it back safely.

Alps had gotten to know Lyat a bit better in those rainy days, and felt he understood why Nidaja liked him. He fully shared Rios' vision in a hope for the future of both Asuna and Amani and he was perhaps more calm and serene than any Asuna the slave had met. His strength and confidence were apparent and the lupine male was sure his green-furred lover was quite enamored with those traits during her travel with him. Alps was happy for Nidaja to have made such a friend among the Asuna.

The young slave had taken advantage of the extra time to continue to research in the library and Nidaja had spent quite a lot of time with Reika and Lyat. She had continued to spar with the elder Asuna sibling, and even some with Reika, in an effort to learn a bit about the very effective fighting styles of the Asuna. Rios had originally expressed some misgivings about teaching it to the Amanians, but at Lyat's insistence that it helped further the intent that peace was possible between the two cultures, she did ultimately allow it. Nidaja was happy to learn a great deal about the actual culture of the Asuna, saying that the person who would be the most enthralled would most certainly be Misty. She had borrowed four books from the library just about Asuna history, particularly interested in their prehistory before Mannus, and how they had lived before their slavery.

Their culture had always been warlike if the books were accurate, and before they were further divided by Mannus, they were comprised of four major feuding tribes, and even more sub-tribes that were just as conflicted. A council of elders from each



tribe were put in charge of uniting the tribes under Mannus with the new “promises” that were ordained by the dark one himself, and this held a tentative peace of utter misery and despair for almost seven centuries. It was easy to see how the effects of it were so ingrained in their every day life at this point that few could even think of any other way. This nightmare was how it was, and how it would stay. It had been easy for Mannus to pit the already war-like Asuna against the Amanians, since they were now forbidden to fight among themselves, and had a lot of anger that could be easily funneled against their lupine neighbors.

Even this was well documented. It was understood, at least at the top levels, that antagonizing the Amanians, hating them and attacking them, was not necessary, and in fact, only further isolated and cursed them, but there was little to be done about it. Following the urgings of their true antagonist, Mannus, was their only choice, lest he form even worse promises for them to have to make. Alps and Nidaja had both gained a much better understanding for what created the strife between their peoples, and armed with this knowledge, the general intended to win the support of the high council to lay the groundwork for what she and Rios had begun to call “The Dawn Initiative.”

The Asuna and Amanian military would stage small battles along their borders at certain intervals with few losses on either side, minor skirmishes here and there to make it appear that the strife itself had been stepped up, rather than decreased. This was to discourage the Uruk or Mannus from suspecting that they were working together. It troubled them both that the fighting had to continue, even with the intent being to reduce losses on both sides by controlling how and where the fights would be and what the ultimate objective was, but it was ultimately necessary for the greater good.

Alps understood this, and knew that the greater work would have to be done on figuring out ways to deal increasingly massive blows against Mannus’ Uruk armies. Mannus himself was powerful, no one denied that, but reducing the Uruk numbers sufficiently at least earned the dwindling peoples of Amani and Asuna time. Time was what they needed most at that crucial moment. Among the research Alps had committed to, he continued to read the things that the Asuna had compiled on the Letai, and even had Rios continue his essence lessons, though she had little time to dedicate to this since she was still technically hiding the white wolf and his lover from most eyes. It was known that he was taken prisoner, which was witnessed by anyone who saw Reika bring him in, but no one really knew what became of him after he disappeared into the more tightly controlled areas of the palace. It was “rumored” that he was being pumped for information about relics that the Amanians held. It was known that Nidaja had come with Lyat, though not nearly so widely and few would know who she was, but the rumor being fashioned is that a prisoner exchange was being worked out due to the sensitive knowledge that the young white wolf had.

Despite the rain, Alps felt that he had managed to accomplish quite a bit in his wasted time, and was deep into one of the most filthy, dustiest tomes that he’d found yet, pulled up from the basement from a trunk that Reika had found while looking for “outfits” for Bone before she settled on the tribal attire she decorated him with now.

Alps found that much of it was written in Letai, which he could not read, but some was written in Asuna, which Lyat was willing to help with. The larger, much stronger Asuna sat beside him, reading carefully as he looked back and forth at the translation, following with a claw-tip. The direct translation was a little more difficult than speaking because some of the references made did not translate directly in their language. With a little work, however, he managed to help Alps trudge through it. Lyat didn't know much about the essence, so he was even less able to understand the ramifications of some of the scrawling, but after a while, it became apparent that the book was someone else's research into the forbidden arts, which was likely why it was hidden away. The Asuna spoke softly, in a hushed tone.

"This is bad book, Alps. Is being such bad idea to be reading this. Is maybe cursed. You see, is study of dark magics. Even Rios not reading this kind of thing." Lyat told the slave in a wavering tone. Alps shook his head to the Asuna and gritted his teeth.

"I understand, Lyat, but I am afraid we do have to read this." The larger male looked distressed. Alps continued. "We aren't going to be able to go against Mannus with little or no understanding of the power he's using against us. We don't have to use the same power, but we do have to know what he can do, why, how it works, and maybe how we can resist it." The slave felt that it was fairly common sense, but the fear of Mannus' power was deeply ingrained in the Asuna.

"Is maybe causing Alps to do bad things if he is knowing these powers. It is saying dark powers is forbidden with reason." Lyat pointed at the passages. Alps nodded.

"Then tell me about that." The slave pointed where Lyat was pointing. "Tell me why the power was forbidden. We should at least know that. We should know what made Mannus' power so dangerous that the Letai themselves forbade its use." Lyat paused a moment longer, reading the passage, feeling perhaps more safe to read since he had no essence ability and could not use the powers described.

"This part..." he pointed lower down. "It describe "the dark source"." Alps looked at it curiously and then back at his translator. He asked softly,

"What is the dark source? Why is this important?" the wolf leaned forward a bit, feeling that he was getting down to the very root of the real cause of the seven century nightmare that was Mannus.

"The dark source is being the place where the dark energy is drawn from." Lyat stated softly.

"The Nether." Alps stated, nodding. Lyat shushed him harshly and held the back of the slave's neck, making him duck like something would come flying out of the wall. This startled Alps, but he held still a moment before murmuring, "What? What did I do?"

“We do not be talking about ... that. You not say that. Not here in city. Is dangerous thing. Is dark place. Rios speak of it and tells us not to speak of it after her. She say Mannus gets evil from there, and there is where things are worse than Mannus. We is not speaking of it!” he hissed. Alps nodded.

“Alright, I see, I will not name it again, but speak of it is something we may need to do. I am not sure I understand your wording, though. Are you saying Mannus gets his power from there? I think I already knew that from another book I read. That’s the place, or the energy, or something, that dark essence users get their power from. But Mannus is the one who chooses to use this power for bad things, it doesn’t say that there is something wrong with the energy does it? It’s just the kind of energy someone would use if they were doing things that would not bring the kind of happiness and contentment that give the Letai their power normally. So, the power is not evil, but the person who is using it might be because that’s the only way they would have power.” Alps tried to state simply. Lyat shook his head.

“No no. That is being very dangerous mistake. Power is not the dangerous thing, place is the dangerous thing. Bad things are being in this place. If you is using the power from there, you is connecting yourself to it, and maybe dangerous things is coming out. Is very dangerous thing to do. It is saying that in this passage. That is why it is being banned. Many bad things happened where power is being used. Worst things of all, Culier Shadows, is from there.” Lyat said with a sound of dread in his voice.

“Culier shadow? What is that?” Alps asked with a sinking tone in his voice. His hopes that he might be able to use Mannus’ own power against him were effectively dashed by the understanding that even using the power was a bad idea.

“It is large black mass, like moving shadow, nothing seen inside, just sliding through forest and swamp and desert with tendrils reaching out forever seeking warmth of life that is lost to it.” Lat’s tone was low and ominous as he spoke, as if he were telling a story to scare small children. “It is size of small hut, maybe as big as large house. If it is touching you, you is left without spirit. You is not speaking or moving or doing. You is alive, but quiet, yes? Then, after a day, you is going mad, and attacking everything until you is dead, no food, no drink, just tearing and kicking and fighting, breaking yourself on things around you until dying. Is worse than dying because friends is having to kill you. If it is consuming you completely, though, you is just lost. It is consuming you. That is Culier Shadow. Is monster released in worst attacks of Mannus upon cities.” Alps listened to the description in absolute horror. He wanted to believe that it was an old tale passed down to frighten the Asuna, but somehow, he doubted it. He doubted that someone as well informed and strong as Lyat would play party to a rumor and superstition without having seen those effects.

“How do you even kill something like that?” Alps asked. Lyat shook his head, his expression still fearful. “Oh...” the slave stated softly after that. The headshake was

pretty self explanatory. "Does the book talk about anything else that might actually be helpful?"

"No. It is talking about touching the ... dark source... And it is talking about body essence change." He pointed at another passage. "Another forbidden thing."

"What is that?" Alps asked.

"This is marked over, someone is thinking it was important before you. It is about making you into essence, and not being a normal body anymore. Is hard to understand, and not good to translate." Lyat stated.

"Being a not normal body?" Alps asked. "Like, turning yourself into essence energy?" Alps felt a chill run through his body, beginning to connect puzzle pieces.

"Yes. Like, making you into all essence." The warrior Asuna tried to explain to the best of his understanding of the passage. "Hard to fight thing that not has body, Lyat think, but they is not talking about it like that, they is talking about moving between essence items. Like, from one crystal to another that is connected, yes? But that is bad because is not able to use your own essence while in such a state. You is having no choice but to use bad place essence. It says it here. Is good theory, and maybe work, but you is touching bad place to be able to move that way. Is maybe make yourself part of crystal, like it is saying, and you is safe there, but you is not able to get out unless you is really powerful with magics from the dark source. It says to get there, you is having to reflect essence of self with essence of dark place perfectly, like mirror." Alps felt a little sick, suddenly. A sudden realization of several things all dawned on him at once, and he just wanted to put the book away. Lyat seemed to know the look, and closed it, putting it back on the bottom of the stack. "Is sorry, not much help. Is all just scary things Mannus do, not good things Letai do."

"No Lyat..." Alps half whispered his reply. "Actually, that's a lot of clarity on a few things. I think I understand exactly how the Shadowfall was created, even if that is not originally what it was for. I do not especially like what that means for me, though. It does not comfort me at all." The Asuna tilted his head curiously at that.

"Is okay? You is not liking something you is found out?" he asked.

"It's better I don't speak of it further, you are actually right about that. These are hopefully mistakes I shall not repeat if I am lucky." Alps got up and looked out the window. "Still raining, huh? I think I have learned enough for today, I am going to go check on Nidaja and Reika and see how their customs tutoring is going." Lyat smiled wryly at that. It was something Alps said intending to lighten the mood, and it did just that.

Reika teaching about Asuna customs had not been difficult, she understood them just fine, but Nidaja trying to teach the young warrior female about the customs of the

Amanians was not going as well, because so many things that the Amanians did as part of their normal lives seemed to make little sense to Reika. A rather lengthy argument broke out about having people whose only function to society was bringing letters back and forth. It would make more sense, to Reika, for people to deliver their own crap, so that person could do other things. It was hard for Nidaja to make the point that not everyone had the time to do that among the other things that they did. Ultimately, it was not really certain if Reika understood or not, but Nidaja had dropped it. These were the kind of entertaining discussions the pair would have for hours on end.

Lyat excused himself to go have lunch while Alps went to rejoin his friends.

The walk to the meeting hall that Nidaja and Reika had taken over to have their discussion about cultural differences was fairly close to the library, so it didn't take long for Alps to get there. When he arrived, he found Nidaja sitting on a table holding Bone, looking into the painted-on eyes intently as if trying to see something small written on them. Alps remained silent a moment. Reika was watching Nidaja for some time. The young hyena finally spoke up.

"You is hearing him, yes? He is saying you is having odd fur. You is green. That is what he is saying, you is not hearing this?" she asked.

"Uh... No, I don't hear a thing, and I am looking right at him. He is just... a quiet bone club." The general did not seem irritated or distressed, as Alps thought he might actually feel himself if Reika was trying to get him to talk to the bone club. The rather insane Asuna looked up and spotted the white-furred wolf.

"Morning Alps-slave. You is done with study? Maybe helping Nidaja hearing Bone! She is almost hear him, Reika is sure, just not close enough. General Nidaja - put nose on Bone! You hear him. You maybe has to touch him closer."

"I am not putting my nose on it."

"Him. Is him. Is okay, he is not hurting you."

"I know he's not, Reika, this is a bone, it can't talk. Alps, you told her this can't really talk, right? This can't be healthy." The General waved to her lover to summon him over to assist her in the matter.

"Ummm... I don't know." Alps felt bad to not be able to back Nidaja up, but he had some suspicions about the shorter hyena's link to the weapon after it "told" her about Elis throwing it and hitting her in the head. Her back was turned to Elis, and she still had a description of the thrower. The fox had admitted to Alps that she threw it. It was hard for him to think of a more logical explanation than the one given so adamantly by the apparently crazy Asuna girl.

“See! Alps, you doubt less now, you is hearing him? You hear bone?” she asked.

“I haven’t heard him, no, but I haven’t really listened to him either.” The slave reached for the weapon, willing to take it off of Nidaja’s hands to diffuse the situation. Denying Bone would not make one friends with Reika. The hyena was very sure about the sentience of her weapon and Alps had learned the confrontation involved in suggesting otherwise. Even if he was not uncertain himself, he was not willing to categorically deny the club spoke to Reika. Calling her a liar was not a very helpful position to advance.

“Listen to him! See what he saying!” Reika piped, jumping up and down a little in a bit of a child-like fashion. Alps chuckled at that, actually a little entertained by it, even if not altogether sold on a friendship with Reika given her violent nature.

“Alright, alright, I will listen...” he said.

“This is kind of silly...” Nidaja said, shrugging.

“Is not silly, is real. Reika is real, Bone is real. Alps know.” The young hyena gestured wildly to the general. Alps focused on the bone. Of course, it said nothing. He frowned a bit. Maybe he was listening wrong. He felt a little silly himself, even considering it, but maybe hearing Bone was the same as seeing the essence. Maybe it was the kind of thing someone shut out unless they really tried to see it again. He cleared his mind, just as he had been instructed to do by Rios, half closing his eyes, looking into the ridiculous crudely drawn eyes of the bone club. He felt light, loose, the way he did when trying to see the essence, and in fact, did see the essence around Nidaja and Reika, before glancing back to the club.

This was when Alps got the most jarring surprise of his day. A silvery essence crackled around Bone in a strong way, an aura as strong as any living thing he’d been able to make out thus far.

“Nidaja, this thing has essence.” The slaves words were flat and incredulous.

“Impossible. It’s not alive.” Nidaja shook her head at that. Reika bounced happily.

“Yur! He sees! Alps is stronger! Reika make him stronger! Only strong persons know bone!” she piped sunnily. Alps cut her off hastily.

“I can’t hear anything with that talking, Reika.” His words were not severe, just intense. This was not possible, he knew it wasn’t, and yet, that’s what he was looking at, but it only pointed more and more to the fact that there was more to Reika than he’d let himself believe. She was crazy, there was not much denying that, but if what he saw was real, Bone was not a part of her madness, and in all respects, from her dealings

with the weapon on the journey to this city, Bone seemed to actually guide Reika, advise her and prevent her from being so severe and resorting to her madness. Did Rios know? Would she have had cause to try to look at the club and see what Alps now saw? Would she consider it a danger? He would not want Reika to be separated from this seeming better influence on her.

“Reika is quiet now. You hearing?” she asked. Alps focused, not on seeing now, but hearing. The senses were attuned different for the essence. Not just seeing, perhaps hearing too. He heard a low sound, hard to make out. He held bone closer.

“This does not make sense, Alps...” Nidaja stated, but the slave held up a finger, shushing the General. This was something he’d never have been impertinent enough to do a year ago. His mind was more focused on the moment than his manners. That sound did have a pattern, like talking. Was it talking? It was the kind of low sound of a male in another room, talking loudly, but too far away to really hear clearly unless one put their ear to the wall. Alps envisioned doing that, not putting it to a wall, but putting his ear to the essence, to the air between him and the essence, whatever that meant. And that’s when he heard it.

“...are the same color as me. I haven’t seen one like you before.” Alps blinked at that, and looked to Reika.

“Can you still hear him?” he asked.

“Yes.” Reika answered.

“Did he just comment that I was the same color as him, and that he hasn’t seen one like me before?” The Asuna’s eyes went wide, which only deepened Alps’ surprise. Even before she answered he knew. Not only was that what Reika also heard, but she had not really expected him to hear it too. She was as surprised as he was.

“You can hear Bone!” the hyena fairly screamed, pointing at Alps with a shaking finger, seeming almost afraid of him for it.

“No way.” Nidaja barked.

“I heard something. It sounds like a voice in another room, or just underground. It’s very odd. I hear it when I do the same things I do to see the essence.” Alps knew this likely distressed Nidaja too, because it did somewhat change the entire understanding one forms of the world around them. How many things were like that, Alps wondered? Were there other objects that were alive but seemed inanimate? Were crazy people not usually crazy, but just able to see and hear more? It was very disturbing.

“Alps,” Nidaja rubbed her chin a bit, thoughtfully. “Ask him what secret I told Reika about when we were talking about traveling alone... This should prove things

once and for all..." The lady wolf seemed almost smugly certain. Alps, however, was hearing Bone's response from the very moment she stopped talking. He listened to Bone.

"Nidaja's afraid of skeletons." The words were muffled, but, like before, definitely there. Alps furrowed his brow. Okay, he didn't know that, so that made sense that if bone told him that, she'd know it was for real.

"You are afraid of skeletons?" Alps proclaimed curiously, hardly able to believe that himself. All the color left Nidaja's ears and she sat down hard on the floor.

"Oh by the essence, that thing is *alive*. It's actually *alive*..." the poor general whimpered.

"Yes! Yes! Finally, someone hears! Reika not gets made fun of anymore! Brother! I tell brother! I tell him now now *now*!" and out the room the hyena fled. Alps looked after the running girl, and held up the club.

"No, don't leave this... she's gone..." he sighed, looking back at Nidaja. Her eyes were fixed on Bone's stupid-looking eyes and blank stare. She looked horrified of it. Alps could not blame her, knowing what he knew now. She was afraid of skeletons and this was part of a living skeleton as far as she was concerned. This was a nightmare for the lovely general.

"It's okay, if he was dangerous we would certainly know by now." The white wolf said. He could not hear anything else bone was saying, since he was too distracted in comforting Nidaja to focus on the essence at that point. "He can't move or anything, just talk. And he's got a moderating effect on Reika. Keeps her level. Keeps her from really going nuts." He stated. The general looked up, her expression not seeming comforted, but Alps looked over to where she looked, as she did seem to be focusing on something. Rios had wandered in. Alps held up Bone. "Oh good, I was hoping to see you sooner rather than later." His words were more positive sounding than they should have been, but he was trying to make light of the spooky situation to comfort Nidaja.

"Why do you have that, Alps? Reika doesn't let other people hold it." Rios asked.

"I think I am allowed now." Alps looked at the painted features of Bone's face.

"Why is that?" Rios asked, "What's wrong with Nidaja, she looks upset. What was that racket earlier, did she get into it with Reika? I swear, that girl is more of a handful than Lyat's worth half the time." The empress sighed with soft reservation. Alps shook his head, regarding the silent, horrified Nidaja a moment, and then speaking, as he figured she was not going to offer up the reason.



“She’s a little alarmed because Reika’s not as crazy as she thought. You didn’t tell me Bone had his own essence. Did you know?” he asked, looking up at Rios. The expression on her face made Alps almost regret saying it. It wasn’t much better than the one Nidaja wore. “Err... Maybe not? Look, he has this white essence...” the wolf held up Bone. Rios peered at it with her look of distress for a moment.

“Alps, I don’t see anything, and I have watched Reika while she was talking to it to watch her own essence, trying to figure out if she was just transferring her suffering onto the thing. It doesn’t have essence.” Rios approached, and took the club.

“I can see it still, even now as you hold it, and I could hear him.” Alps stated.

“What?!” Rios barked harshly. Holding the club away from herself suddenly. “Please tell me that’s a joke, you can’t seriously expect me to-“

“It’s true.” Nidaja said. “I told Reika something before Alps came in that he would not have known, and Bone repeated it for him. That thing talks.” The general looked dead-serious as she gazed at Rios and the Empress looked back at her. Alps could tell that Rios was thinking quickly. What had she said in front of it? Could it convey messages to Mannus? What did the fact that it had essence she could not see mean? The slave felt bad to generate such turmoil, but this was something that had to be known.

“Alps, I am aware that you catch on quick in your essence-viewing, but I told you that it takes time to be sure that you are seeing real essence. Did you try crossing your eyes? Did the image separate?” she asked. Alps blinked. He had not tried that, so he did so. He was not cheered up much by the fact that the image did in fact separate. He was looking at something real.

“It’s definitely not in my head. And that still would not let me know what he was saying, even if it was.” Rios sat down on the table, holding Bone in one hand and then the other.

“Reika’s not able to see Essence, is she? Why would she be able to hear Bone?” Nidaja asked, just as Alps was thinking the exact same question. Rios put bone down on the table, looking at it with a bit of worry.

“There is a chance she can actually see the essence, but I didn’t think she could. I thought that was pretty much out of her family.” Rios stated in a hushed tone. “But, I will admit, she has a bit of the other... residual traits... The violent tendencies and the madness, for one.”

“She’s got Letai blood.” Alps stated.

“Like Rios?” Nidaja asked.

"You are correct. One of the last of her family, her and Lyat both." Rios was calm and contemplative, looking at Bone quietly.

"You and Lyat are lovers because you initially hoped ..." Alps didn't finish the sentence, already knowing he was right.

"It didn't work, of course. My bloodline and theirs was already too far diverged. They were descended of one of the families that was supposed to pair with mine that the elders were developing, but they knew early on that their link to the essence was already far more dilute. Very little Letai blood remained. It's amazing to see anything made it through for Reika. But why can't I see it? That does not make sense..."

Alps felt another harsh cold chill run through him at a possible realization. There was a good reason that he could think of that he was able to see the essence around Bone and Rios was not. It was the same reason that Alps was starting to suspect he was able to escape the Shadowfall, and no one else had been. It was a truth he did not want to face that moment.

He did not get to share that realization with the others, however, because Lyat, out of breath, burst into the room loudly and hastily.

"Empress! We is having big troubles!" Rios looked back to him fearfully. It was obvious to Alps by her reaction that she did not expect him to do that for small emergencies, like being out of food stocks or something of that nature. She was instantly on edge, knowing this had to be a dire emergency.

"What's happened, what's going on?" the empress barked quickly.

"A huge detachment of Uruk are in the city, searching for something. They is going house to house, in a sweep. I am not thinking that rumor about the one who rose from Shadowfall escaped the dark one's ears. He is following rumor, he is being after Alps!" The words fell like a death sentence on Alps' ears, and he looked with despair at Nidaja. He had been right. He brought her doom. If she was found here, it would ruin the plans of the Asuna. Rios would be killed, and Nidaja and Alps were certainly to face their end.

"Hide us! We can't be found here!" Nidaja shouted to the empress. Reika skidded into the room.

"Trouble!" she cried. "Oh, you know already." She leaned on the door frame and crossed her arms casually.

"Yes, big trouble. Nidaja, we can't hide you or Alps. If the Uruk come into the palace, they can follow your essence. These things were made to track and hunt the Letai. Since you are both essence-users, there isn't a way to hide from them, and you can't flee the city because there's not a back way out. It's made to be defended, not

escaped. The Asuna don't retreat." Nidaja groaned. Alps felt ill. Just his luck. He was about to be killed over someone's infallible valor.

"We can't be found here, everything will be ruined! We wanted to prevent needless carnage, not cause it!" Alps cried, knowing that his life was not the only one on the block now. He knew the promises. He knew the laws. The entire city could be burned to the ground for this treachery. Every Asuna here could die, and he knew it very, very well. The look on Rios' face made it more obvious to Nidaja, who had not caught on yet.

"No... Oh Empress they will attack your city, there has to be some way out... There has to be a way to keep us from them." Nidaja said, her voice cracking. Alps rarely if ever heard the general genuinely afraid. She was now. He gritted his teeth, cursing now what he was more than ever.

"There is no way out. There's no other option now. We tried my friends, but this, sadly, may be the end of our plans." Rios said, obviously still frantically thinking, even with her spoken realization staring her in the face. There was not a way out.

"Think, Lady Rios. Surely there is being some other way out..." Lyat held the empress' shoulders reassuringly. Alps' eyes twitched back and forth rapidly. He was thinking deeply. Thinking rapidly. He was searching his mind for any answer, the way he had at the mountaintop the last time he faced the impossible number of Uruk that were about to sack Jalana. He felt that strange thrill of excitement, the burn in his body and mind of danger and the response to it, adrenalin pumped into his system, slowing down time as he thought... thought...

"It's alright, Lyat, we did try. We did our best. What we did, we did for the Asuna and for the future of all peoples who deserved to be free from him. That we fail does not change what the outcome would have been if we had not tried." Rios' words were sage and genuine. She was a powerful leader well accustomed to her responsibility. She knew what she risked, and why she did it. Alps growled under his voice, clenching his fists. He would *not* have cost her the city, or even a single life in it. There was a way. He thought desperately. The best answers were impossible, so he immediately thought the worst.

If Alps and Nidaja were dead, would they still attack? Killed while being interrogated? Surely that would stave off the attack, but they did not even tell Mannus that they were suspected of anything. No, it would still look like treachery, and he'd be watching Rios. She'd not be able to have a child without it being obvious what she'd done. But what could be worse for Alps and more convincing than their deaths? The only way that the city would be safe is if the rumored white wolf and general were not even found in the castle. So how could they hide so that someone who could see essence itself could not find them?

The idea hit Alps hard, like a shot through the heart. He even staggered from it, winded, but the idea was so terrible it made being killed by the Asuna to protect the city sound inviting in comparison.

"We will be ready to fight. We is taking many, many deathdolls with us!" Reika took Bone from the table. "We is fighting to the end with courage!" she shook the club over her head, it's feather head-dress bouncing.

"I am with you Reika. We will make this cost Mannus before the end. We will not be a city of sad, beaten dogs!" Nidaja said, drawing her sword.

"That is not working. They pin us down in the castle, then make us see city burn, and children die on the stones on the street, thrown from their houses." Lyat explained.

"Thank you for that, Captain Sunshine." Nidaja groaned.

"We won't be here when they get here..." Alps said, holding his hand out to Nidaja. "Give me your satchel." The general looked at him like he was crazy. Alps' mind was still burning, but the pieces had all come together. There was a reason for it all to go the way it was going, and he felt certain that he found the solution that was left for him to find, as horrible as the decision would be.

"What's the plan, Alps? You seem a bit confident given the circumstances." The general asked him with heavy skepticism as she handed him the black leather satchel where she kept food, maps, and the like. Alps looked in the satchel. It was still there. She actually kept it with her the entire time. He was not really surprised. He felt that the puzzle had to fall together in just this way, and the fact that she actually carried it with her only proved it more to Alps. It was not a happy moment of revelation for him. That his plan might work was the most horrifying thing he'd ever come to realize.

"Speak up, they will be at the palace in less than an hour, we are very much out of time." Rios said with obvious exasperation. "You can't hide anywhere here that the Uruk can't see you, and you can't sneak past them. If you know another way then fill me in, we have a lot at stake!"

"We will not hide in the palace. We will hide somewhere no one would expect us to go." Alps said softly. "And trust me... they won't be looking here..." The white wolf held up a dark, almost black crystal, and Nidaja's eyes widened. Rios backed up four steps or so.

"Alps, what are you ... Why would you even have that, those are terrible relics." Rios seemed to definitely know what it was. Alps flattened his ears and looked away a moment, at the crystal, staring into it deeply. Rios seemed to get the hint when he did. "No. You could not even consider..." Rios growled.

“How’s that thing supposed to help us?” Nidaja asked with a grimace. “We don’t have enough time to fetch a priestess to help, and there’s no way for you to get in to yank one out.” Alps lowered his head, ears back. The general had not figured out the implication as fast as Rios, but she was only getting half his idea at the moment. She was about to be a lot more upset.

“I don’t have that ability, Alps. Only Mannus does, and it’s very, very dark. It uses the energy from the void. The worst possible magic, that’s not an option for me. Even if I could use it, I don’t think I am capable of that.” Rios held her hands out, as if trying to reason with the young slave.

“You won’t need to do it, Empress.” Alps said darkly, looking back at the general apologetically.

“Alps, it’s a dead end, if it can’t be done, it can’t be done!” Nidaja said even louder.

“Rios...” the slave said with a soft tone, sad in his utter certainty on this answer, “... I have been there before, and escaped. I can see essence on Bone that you cannot. I have a link to it. I don’t want to do this, believe me I don’t, but I cannot let your city burn over me and ruin the plans that are all that give you and so many others hope. I will face this for the Asuna. Nidaja will too.” He stated, to Rios’ stunned silence as her mind raced over the very things that Alps had. He was not an expert, not even close to what the empress was, but he just knew now, given the options, and how fate had stacked the peril against him, that *this* was what he had to do. The puzzle pieces fell into place for Rios as well, as she seemed to go pale and quiet, clenching her fists.

Elis had been right. If he didn’t want his friends to die, if he didn’t want to see the fall of the Asuna, or hear the anguished cries of his friends, he would have to do something. If he thought he could do something, he had damn well better do it! He steeled his courage a bit, and moved to the center of the room.

“Reika. Lyat. Out.” Rios said.

“Is begging pardon?” Reika said. “What is going on?”

“Reika, we is having to leave.” Lyat stated coldly, his eyes wide and fearful. “You is not seeing this.” Alps nodded to Lyat. It seemed the large male warrior at least understood. He knew well the research Alps had been looking into.

“No! No killing new friends, we fight together!” Reika shouted with fury Alps had not seen except before he had his arm broken. He smiled wryly. Reika would be a good friend for someone to have in a pinch, he thought. A little off the path, as it were, but a good friend, to say the least.

"They is not dying. They is hiding, but we cannot watch. Come." He pushed Reika out of the room, and cast a long glance back at Alps. He took a long moment to gaze at the wolf before speaking again in a solemn, very symbolic-sounding tone. "You is shaming the spots off of the Asuna in your bravery, wolf. Lyat is knowing why your friends risk all to find you." And with that, the large male Asuna closed the door. Alps looked back at Rios, and a fuming Nidaja.

"Okay, we have the place to ourselves. I kind of trust them, but okay. Fill me in on your plan." The general demanded.

"They were not sent out because we don't trust them." Rios said.

"They were sent out because they should not see what I have to do. It would weight too heavily on their spirits." Alps stated.

"I'm a fighter, Alps. Suicide is not an option." Nidaja said.

"There's worse things than dying." Alps replied.

"What?" the general questioned in return, then looked at the crystal Alps was holding. "Oh *FUCK* no. No, no *no*, you are out of your mind!" the general held her sword tight, but her hand was shaking. "Besides, Rios just said she's not capable!"

"But I am." The white slave said, looking sadly at Nidaja.

"You got out! That doesn't mean you can go right back in! It's probably doesn't work that way!" the green-furred lady fairly shouted.

"I have been researching for days, Nidaja. I read the same things Mannus read to figure it out. I know how he did it and I know why others can't. Everything about this is forbidden, but we have no choice. Stand close to me. Hold my hand..." Alps held his hand out to the general. She looked at him like he was holding a crossbow to her face.

"This is impossible. We are wasting time." Nidaja stated solidly.

"Rios," Alps said with grim determination, "...after we do this, give the crystal to Lyat. Have him take the crystal to Diera, and explain to Nita what happened. If I am right... about this... about everything I have gone through so far... the next person who will see me will be the queen, and we will have forfeited nothing." The empress nodded, gritting her teeth, and Nidaja reluctantly took Alps' hand, shaking.

"I don't believe this. No, Alps. You can't be serious..." the quaking general pleaded. "If this doesn't work..."

"Then the situation is no worse." The slave completed the sentence himself.

“Be careful, Alps, and good luck.” Rios said.

“You have to leave too. It’s not like I have had practice. I can’t afford to drag you with me by accident. There are no guarantees.” The young lupine smiled at the empress weakly.

“I would not want to watch it even if it were safe to see.” Rios said with a squeak in her voice. Nidaja whimpered softly in quiet despair. The white lupine felt awful for what he was doing, but it was not like he was supposed to enjoy this kind of choice.

“Thank you Rios. Don’t worry. We will realize your dream. If I am willing to do this for it... who can stop me?” the white wolf asked, grinning, acting far, far more confident and hopeful than he was feeling. He knew what he was about to try, but not if it would work, or if he would fail and scatter his and Nidaja’s essence to the universe. Either way would spare the Asuna. Nita would understand the sacrifice of two for a kingdom. The slave cleared those thoughts from his mind, however. He had to succeed. There was no choice for failure. He would do this, and he would be with Nita again. Even Mannus would not stop him. He closed his eyes as the door closed, and Rios likely took Lyat and Reika far from that room, to avoid getting caught up in it.

“You are really going to try, aren’t you...?” Nidaja asked quietly.

“Not a lot of choice.” Alps said, focusing, chasing thoughts of failure, loss, despair, all of it from his mind. He had to fortify his spirit, he refused to cause a rift where other things could slip through. He already knew what the energy looked like. He could see it around Bone. He could call it up in his mind. Nidaja stood in front of him, looking at the crystal in his hands. The room began to feel colder. Alps knew the feeling. He felt it for an instant before it happened the first time. He swallowed. It had not been the first time. That had been the second. He’d not escaped just once, he’d somehow done it twice. Once as a child. He looked up into Nidaja’s eyes. She murmured softly,

“I believe in you, Alps... We will be fine. We will face this together, and come back home in victory. You’ve come out of this place before. We are gonna be okay.” The slave looked into her eyes, and her eyes widened. He could see his reflection in her eyes as light seemed to erupt around them, flooding the room. “Oh Alps... something’s happening...” came Nidaja’s soft, stunned words. Alps could not see what she could see, but he focused on what he needed most now.

Alps felt the heat of that energy tearing through him the same as he did when he escaped the crystal with Luna and Ceriss and the fox. He felt that rise of pressure. This was truly intense power. He could see how it could cause the Letai great fear. He focused harder, and pushed his mind to thoughts of Nidaja. Nita. Misty. Uri. Misha. He felt his heart flood with joy. Others had let the dark energy corrupt them perhaps, making them lose control, but the slave would not allow that to happen now. Not when he had to protect Nidaja. Not just the general, but everyone. Everyone needed him to

succeed. He gritted his teeth and focused. Peace. The end of his friends fears and wars and the suffering he saw in the Asuna. This would be a scary story to tell children some day and nothing more. He called out softly,

“We will make it, Nidaja. Don’t be afraid. Wherever we go, we go together!” and with that, all his joyful thoughts coalesced into a single motive. He’d help his friends no matter what. He would return their love to them in a way that even he could not fully comprehend. Without a word to describe it, he flooded his heart with that joy, and cried out, “*Shadowfall!!!!*” and then all was silent.

All was so beautifully dark and quiet.

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Rios looked out over the plains that lead to the walls of her great city. The Uruk had been gone for a day, traveling back to hold the northern borders from the encroachment of any curious folks who wanted to take a better look at the mines where her people were toiling. How many more generations would they toil? How long would the same story play itself out for every family in her dominion? Her hair was whipped in the cool wind, the rainy season bringing hectic weather, storms, and cold and hot days in a mere week of separation. The empress held her tummy with her cupping dark hands as her robes fluttered in the breeze. She could feel the life there. She was glad of it beyond words, and it filled her with hope that other fears could not bury. She leaned back against a squat, fluffy plains-tree. She heard a voice from behind her.

“We is ready to go with your leave, Lady Rios...” Lyat said softly. Reika was with him, dressed for travel once again, holding bone clutched with determination in her hand.

“You surpassed all expectations on your last mission. Even Alps felt he could only trust this to you. Are you sure you are willing to go there, all the way there, on your own?” Rios looked into her lover’s eyes. His brown, tattered cloak flapped in the wind a bit, worn from travel from many journeys before.

“I would shame us all if I was refusing the slave’s request.” The spotted male spoke with a sense of duty and honor. Reika nodded to her brother.

“We is getting crystal to the queen. She is maybe not thanking us, but we is getting it there, and bringing your message of peace, even if Nidaja is not delivering it.” Reika said as intelligently as she knew how. It was a lot larger task to her than kidnapping someone. And she knew the danger. Handing a Shadowfall crystal to Nita and saying, ‘Here’s your guy... let’s be friends.’ seemed as reckless as what Alps had done.



With an embrace to Reika and a loving kiss to Lyat, Rios sent the pair on their way, to travel far from their home city into what was still understood as enemy territory. They had gone before, though not to Diera. They would come back again, Rios felt sure. Perhaps they would bring the news she wanted just as much as the safe return of her lover and dear friend. Perhaps they would bring her news that Alps was free, and back in the arms of his own lover. The Empress rubbed her tummy again. Lucky arms those were indeed to get to welcome back someone like that. She hoped that the queen would see Rios' living treasure as the peace offering the Empress intended. She turned and looked at her city. The Asuna leader spoke softly as Lyat and Reika vanished over the windswept grassy plains.

"Alps, I don't know if you got into that place safely... I feel odd actually hoping that you are in that terrible, lonely place... But I hope that you see the ones you love again. Yours is a story I wish for the bards to have a happy end to..." She hung her head, and, fearful, but still hopeful, she wept, unable to think of any other thing to do as the winds pulled at her long, dark hair, and the day wore on into yet another sunset that Alps was not going to see.

**Sirius, Book III**  
*The Essence*

*Comments or Questions?*

Contact Alps: [sarsis@gmail.com](mailto:sarsis@gmail.com)

Or just drop a note at: <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/sarsis/>

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**Chapter 14**

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The darkness was familiar, at least. Alps could not feel or hear or see anything at first. He remembered that though. He was ready for it, but he knew with a sense of sorrow that Nidaja was not and was probably horrified about now. He knew he was supposed to be holding her hand, but wondered if that was still true after he performed the technique he'd used to move them into this dark place.

The white-furred slave began to focus on his own energy, his own essence. The last time her was here, he did this on his own, without realizing it. Now that he understood it, it came easier. He would feel it soon enough. He would feel himself drifting. He waited for a bit, and finally, it started. It was like waiting for feeling to return to one's foot when it was asleep. It took a bit. He drifted, drifted, drifted. It felt like he drifted for an entire day. He was not sure if Nidaja was still connected to him in some way, but his mind was dominated with finding her, calling out to her, searching for her. Last time he was here, he thought he was dead. There was a kind of peace and tranquility to it when he was not thinking that. It really was not so bad. He felt a little flash of mirth go through him when he considered it might be a nice vacation spot. It was certainly not a bad place to be alone with one's thoughts.

Drifting did give him time to think about what he'd done. He knew the general idea of what he was doing, but felt foolish for the risk he took in taking Nidaja with him. However, he was sure she agreed that the unfortunate alternative, getting all the Asuna in the city killed just for being there, would not have been acceptable. He made the right choice. It wasn't a nice choice, but it was the right one. He knew he'd have ugly choices to have to make, but this was getting to be a bit frustrating. He did feel somewhat confident that he could get out of the crystal, he remembered very well what he did before, but he knew that Nidaja would not feel such confidence, and she would be subject to the effects of the crystal that Alps had somehow missed when he was plunged into it. She would suffer as long as he was not there by her side.

With this in mind, Alps pressed on hard, focusing and focusing, as he had done the first time, looking for light. What he thought had been a way out the last time he'd been here turned out to be the light of someone else's essence in the darkness. It had been someone else trapped in the crystal. He would find the closest one of those lights and hoped that it would be Nidaja, but even if it wasn't, it would at least be someone, and that someone deserved to be free as well. Would there be many others? He would feel terrible for not bringing home everyone in this crystal. Could he afford to really stay

that long, though? He asked that his crystal be taken to Nita, but would she go to war with Rios for letting it happen if he took too long getting back out? He hoped that she would believe Lyat about the choice he made. Ultimately, he suspected she would. She knew what he would do for his friends.

It again felt like a day or so of just drifting in one direction before he saw the first light, a mere speck. He drifted harder, faster toward it. He was getting better at it, especially without regret and despair holding him back like last time. It did not take him long to get to the outside of that ball of light, like a sun shining in the darkness.

And then he was there. He knew immediately he had found Nidaja's little world of suffering inside the crystal. He was standing in the ruins of Castle Diera. Only Nidaja would have this as her nightmare. He moved calmly through the scenery. It was all constructed of her fears, loneliness, regrets and deepest disappointments. It was not real. Would Nidaja know it was false? Would she really understand? The place was very convincing. He looked around at what was present in this limited world. He could not see the town through what seemed to be a dense fog that clung to the ground by the castle, but was higher down into the town itself, but one could suspect that it looked much the same as the castle. The castle itself was burned, broken, and covered in vines that were, themselves, dry and lifeless from what might be the scourge of an endless winter. There was not even any wind, just the cold, eerie calm of the wet fog hanging over everything. It was as bleak and desolate as he could imagine a place being. It was even worse in some fashion than Luna's scorched battleground where he had found that priestess, and far worse than the lonely tomb where Ceriss was the last remaining Letai standing watch over the spirits of all her departed friends. It was worse because he recognized the place, and knew the suffering that had to be going on there.

Alps sped up his pace as he searched. There was not much left of the castle itself. The top floors were gone entirely, only the first floor, in segments, remained, and were buried mostly in rubble, so there was not anything to search there. He went alongside the castle ruins, and finally heard a sound. Soft sobbing. Alps rolled his eyes, speaking to himself softly.

"Nidaja, no, you know you were Shadowfallen, you know this isn't real." He quickened his pace and came around to the back courtyard, where he and Nita and his other friends had spent quite a lot of time enjoying relaxing afternoons together. He had started to wonder if he would ever enjoy days like that again, care free, and looking forward only to dinner and his night life with his love, Nita, or any she cared to share that love with. He finally found the general, still in her armor, crumbled on her knees, hands covering her face, weeping.

In front of her were grave stones, marked with the names of her parents, yes, but others, beside them were marked with more familiar names. Nita. Misty. Misha. Uri. All in a row, these gravestones were slabs taken from the castle, and the names crudely scrawled on them. Another stone rested beside those, marked only with the etched words of Nidaja's own name, and the phrase, "Presumed Dead". Alps understood

immediately what the nightmare for Nidaja was about. She thought that she had escaped the Shadowfall, but that she was too late, and that the empire had fallen, leaving everyone to wonder where their general had gone when they needed her most. Her fear was not only the thought of losing those she loved, but the failure to protect them. Alps put his hands in his pockets, still attired in the now somewhat tattered tunic and trousers he wore when wandering about Diera with his lovers not so long ago.

"It's not real, Nidaja." Alps said finally, not sure how to break the drone of her soft weeping. She gasped, and held still. She seemed to struggle for a moment with disbelief as she remained on her knees in front of the scrawled writing. "Get up, Nidaja, this is the Shadowfall. This is your fear, and nothing else." Alps said. Even as he said it, he found himself wondering again why he didn't see anything like this when he was cast in. He just saw darkness, and he wasn't afraid of the dark. He was alone, but he didn't truly feel that he was alone, and without hope. Was he immune to the effects that trapped others here? Nidaja finally turned, looking up at him, her eyes red from crying.

"Alps?" she asked. "Oh Alps, it's really you? You are ... you are sure this is not real? It feels so real..." she added, standing, dusting off her knees.

"I am quite sure. I have been here before, remember?" he stated. Nidaja rubbed her face a bit, and nodded.

"It's been hours and hours... maybe days, where were you?" she asked. Alps shook his head and replied softly, taking Nidaja's hands. They were cold, but he felt them heat up fast in his own hands. She gasped softly at that as he spoke.

"We got separated. I had to find you. This is a big place." He looked into her eyes, trying to seem reassuring, but it seemed that the effect of just touching her hands with his was doing that. It made him real, where before she might have assumed him to be a phantom.

"You are so warm..." she noted softly, looking at his hands. "Everything in this place feels dead and empty. Even I feel that way.

"That is your fear, Nidaja. Ignore it. Make it go away. Make this place as unreal as it is. You are with me now, and what's real is the fact that we will be home soon, and Nita will be very happy to see us. We succeeded. We took a risk and we protected the Asuna. They cannot doubt our intentions now. Better times will be upon both our peoples." The general's eyes glittered in near-tears as Alps spoke, taking in his words. He knew the importance of shaking her darkness. It was necessary to bring Luna out of the depths of her cursed world. Even if it didn't affect him, Alps was starting to understand how the suffering here was supposed to work, and what he needed to do in order to break it. He continued to speak, raising his voice to shake Nidaja's heart. "Let the happier thoughts, the better memories all fill your heart... Let us escape this nightmare together!" The slave continued to hold Nidaja's hands tightly, looking happily into her eyes. She closed those violet eyes softly, tears rolling down either side of her

green muzzle, and the world around the two wolves began to change. The fog began to lift, and the sun began to shine, and the castle, in a fading instant was whole again. It was still empty, of course, but it and the town below were simply whole again, just as Nidaja remembered them.

The lady lupine opened her eyes, and then just sobbed, falling into Alps' arms, making him feel like crying himself. He knew Nidaja was joyful, but she was still crying. He felt warmth wash over the area. It really was a mirror of her feelings. When they changed from despair to something more pleasant, it did not take long to fix the negative effects on Nidaja's world within the crystal.

"So..." The general leaned back a little and adjusted her armor. "Our clothes go in too, huh?" She tugged at it a bit, trying to bring herself back under control. Alps was sure that being seen crying was actually embarrassing to the rather strong-willed lady.

"Our memories of them do at least. And I was still dressed when I got out of the crystal last time, as you recall. They are linked to us in the moment we leave, I suppose, perhaps by our self-image within our essence alone." He noted, though certainly not an expert on the matter. "Everything we were carrying went too." Alps held up his satchel and nodded to Nidaja. "Well, except the crystal." He looked around. "Looks better, right? So you know it was not real. There's nothing at all to worry about, and hey! We saved ourselves a week of walking, Lyat and Reika are taking us home right now." He wanted to be certain that she did not start to doubt again, as it would make things harder on her, perhaps. Alps did not wish to see her suffer at all, since he was the one who brought her here.

"Yes, I know. I'm sorry I jumped to conclusions. It just seemed like... I don't know... The most possible and most horrible outcome, you know?" she asked, standing beside Alps and holding his hand. "So..." she looked back and forth through the town.

"Yes?" the white wolf asked curiously. He was very interested in Nidaja's thoughts on a place that she would be one of the few to ever leave it, and one of the few who would get to share her opinion of the experience. He knew Misty would hang on her every word concerning it.

"What are we doing now? Are we leaving?" she asked. Alps shook his head a little. The general frowned a bit.

"We can't leave yet." Alps was cautious in how he said this, wanting to make sure she didn't think the pair were just stuck there or that something was wrong.

"Why not? So Lyat and Reika have time to get us home, you mean?" she asked. "We don't know how much time has passed. You said it felt like just a few days or so but it was months for the rest of us. You said so yourself." Nidaja said softly. Alps held Nidaja's hand reassuringly tighter.

“Right. We don’t want to stay long, but I could not leave last time until I had freed the priestesses and the crystal was clear. I think one of two things happened.” The wolf tried to think of the clearest way to explain, while at the same time, trying to make it sound more like he was giving baking instructions that had to be followed, rather than admitting there might be complications to the plan. “First, I think I was drawing energy because of my ... ahh... contact with the priestesses...” he stated.

“Contact?” Nidaja asked curiously. Alps blushed a bit.

“Oh... that’s right, I told Nita, but I didn’t get a chance to really talk about it with you. They were a bit... starved for affection and company when I found them.” Nidaja’s eyes widened at Alps’ statement.

“Oh my...” she murmured softly. “All three of them?” she asked.

“Not the fox.” Alps offered quickly, as if Elis might just slap him again for the mere implication somehow. He did not think it impossible, really, for him to still run into her in this place.

“But the two priestesses... That is... Oh Alps, that’s kind of silly. You have a thing for powerful lovers. You would do well to admit you may have an obsession.” The general giggled at that loudly. Alps shook her arm a little, in a playfully scolding fashion.

“Nidaja, it wasn’t like that. They were very... insistent.” Alps looked up at the blue sky. “Knowing what I know about the Letai now, I can better understand why they did it though. It was to give me some of their strength. Some of their power. They might not have thought it would do anything to get us out, but it was their reward for freeing them from loneliness at least. But I was stronger after each contact with them, and after getting all the lights out of the crystal. The whole thing became clear, and I broke out.” Nidaja seemed to dwell on that explanation for a bit. She looked thoughtfully around the quiet, deserted town, and finally, she murmured, with a knowing grin,

“So, like... if we have a bit of fun here and ran around town and did the same things you and the priestesses did, we can get out of here faster, yes? Maybe we make a few new friends in the crystal, and show them a good time, and then we are out of here?” Nidaja’s tail swung back and forth a little faster now. “Alps, are you serious, that’s what you did? I thought it had to have been a terrible, horrible nightmare for you. I actually thought you had endured terrible stress and a struggle beyond what any who had gone in had known in order to get out... You are seriously telling me you just fucked your way out of this thing? No wonder no one’s ever gotten out, no one but you would have ever thought that would work!” she laughed. Nidaja had to sit down on one of the benches that replaced the headstones. “That is the stupidest, but cleverest thing I have ever heard!” she wailed in between her fits of laughter. Alps flattened his ears at that. Was she teasing him? Should he feel indignant, or did she really think it was silly?

"I... I didn't actually plan it like that..." he offered meekly. Nidaja took the young lupine by the hand, shaking her head as she grinned at him, pulling him around the side of the castle.

"Oh, stow it love, come on, I know just the place."

"Wait, what?" he asked. He strode quickly along behind the general, tightly in tow. "Where are we going?"

"Are you serious?" Nidaja laughed, "We have the entire fucking city with no one in it. I am going to tag some of my favorite spots with you, Alps! I would regret not having some fun with such an opportunity!" Alps yeepped a bit, and blushed as Nidaja took him toward the town, seeming very intent on having some illicit adventures around the city.

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"You have got to be insane." The grey-furred guard held a halberd across the hall as the other drew her sword, looking fearfully at the pair of bedraggled hyenas who stood before them. "I don't know how you got into the city, but if you bring one more of your filthy spots toward the castle, we will take you apart." Both guards looked grim and determined, knowing very well that a fight against one Asuna would have been stacked against them. Two was almost out of the question. Those crazy things were monsters by Amanian standards.

"We is requesting audience with Queen Razelle. Is no joke." Lyat said in a soft, serene tone, trying hard to make himself seem less aggressive. He was a hyena, however, and was quite aware that just being that made him an immediate threat here. He and his sister had done well to obscure their faces and spots on their travels to this point, but no one who was cloaked beyond recognition was going to get an audience with Nita, he was sure. He would have to try to convince them of the importance of the mission.

"You are not getting in, no matter what you say. We have no reason to believe an Asuna, and no reason to listen. Please, avoid the injuries that you are asking for at this moment, and turn around and go back to your mud huts." One of the two guards poked at Reika a bit, who backed up a little, and reached for the bone club on her back, but Lyat stopped her.

"Go and be calling Misty out here then." Lyat spoke in a grim tone. "At least she is understanding what we is needing to say, and knowing it to be truth. Please, just this if no audience can be given." The strong Asuna knew that Misty would be keenly interested in the story he had to tell, and would know why they needed to speak with

Nita.

“So you can divide and conquer? Get one of us alone, and then slip in, I don’t think so. We will stand here, both of us, to stop you until help arrives, and then we will drive you off or kill you outright if you do not follow our instructions, now leave.” The taller of the two guards spoke louder as the threatened Lyat. The Asuna sighed softly.

“Then we wait for help to maybe arrive until Misty or Nita is coming down just to find out what is going on. It is not mattering to me, there is no failing in talking to her though. Not accepted.” He noted. A spear jabbed at his head. With a clink, it was deflected with his metal wrist-band, off to the side. The guard pulled back, rethinking her attack. Reika pulled out her bone club, his feather-laden blank-eyed visage openly visible. The two guards burst into laughter.

“What the hell is that?!” one of them asked.

“Is Bone. You is showing respect, Bone is polite. You is being likewise.” Reika barked. The laughter was doubled.

“No, seriously, what the hell are you two? We thought assassins or mercenaries, but come on!” Their laughter made Reika fume.

“Please, brother, can we be harming these and going inside? Is going to rain soon.” The girl Asuna said.

“No Reika, you know the rules. No harming the Amani people. Even if they is being a little insufferable.” He sighed again, thinking hard about how to get around this impasse. A new voice spoke up from behind the guards.

“What is this? Asuna? In this city?” The dark male lupine towered over the two girl guards, looking as large and strong easily as Lyat. The hyena tensed a bit. He could read his motions. This one was a fighter. His dark leather armor showed that he might even be part of the military, which made him a genuine threat to him and his sister.

“We is Lyat and Reika.” The male hyena spoke up clearly, pointing to himself and his sister. “We is here for meeting with Queen Razelle. We having important messages from Rios Dominis, but guards is not admitting, or even allowing to speak with council, and telling of message is important.” As Lyat spoke, the lupine fighter gazed intently with his yellow eyes gleaming with intelligence and passion. He nodded a bit, and looked to the guards, his eyes narrowing. The chuckling guards went silent.

“Were you going to stand their laughing, or were you going to actually get some help to deal with them, you idiots?!” the dark-furred male shouted to the other two. They immediately cowered. Lyat arched a brow. He was not used to seeing males in such a dominant role in Amani. Yelling at a female like that would get an Asuna put in



jail, and he had understood that the roles were not that much different for the Amani.

“Sorry Lunar, Sir, they just... We didn’t want to leave just one of us here!” one of the guards stated loudly.

“The girl could have broken your necks while the other one went for tea! You should have both went for help.” Lunar said sternly. Lyat noticed his sister wagging a bit. This Lunar fellow acknowledged the strength of the Asuna. He knew how to manipulate their culture to his favor. He was attempting to reduce the insult that the other two had levied against them. Lyat waved his hand dismissively.

“Is not necessary, warrior Lunar.” Lyat motioned for Reika to put Bone away.

“What is it you wish to speak with the queen about? I’m Lunar, I am currently acting guard captain while Lady Nidaja tends to matters elsewhere... matters which we understand are the responsibility of the Asuna, if I am not mistaken.” the strong wolf rumbled.

“Lunar is boy guard captain? Boys is stronger in Amani than Asuna first realize, maybe.” Reika stated with her eyes widening. Lyat shook his head. The guy knew how to get Reika’s attention it seemed, and perhaps he thought he would need to if Lyat, being male, was not in charge. Both were in non-typical roles, it seemed. Lyat considered that a moment, thinking it might give him some advantage in speaking with Lunar. He cleared his throat a little and spoke.

“Asuna is taken Servant Alps from her. Is bringing him back, but is needing to speak about things regarding him. Important, private things. Queen is not telling everything about slave to everyone in kingdom, and Asuna is respecting this. Not telling everyone things either. Only queen or councilor is needing to know.” The larger hyena bowed a bit in politeness. He would use his knowledge of Amani culture to his advantage as well.

“Alps, now... There is a name I am pretty familiar with. You are wise to bring him back, but if you are seeking reward or even ransom, you will find she does not react well to those demands. He’s more important to her than you think.” Lunar circled around the larger hyena, who did not move, though Reika shifted nervously.

“Lyat is knowing things he is not saying in front of guards. Only for Nita to know. Queen is having right to secrets.” Lyat leaned back a little, trying to look relaxed.

“You can say these things in front of me. I will hold them as secret, and the other guards with me will be sworn to this under penalty of death. Tell me now, and I will determine if the matter is so private that it requires the attention of high council members or the queen herself. Now, what does your message concern?” he asked. Lyat inwardly cursed. This fighter was not a pushover. He was a tactician not so different from Nidaja. The direct approach and hoping he believed the hyena would be

the only way. The two other guards looked smug that the hyena's journey had ended and their commander was smarter than the spotty monster. Lyat spoke, Reika looking nervous all the while.

"Asuna is come to the queen to tell her important news about Alps, who is freed himself from Shadowfall, and is freed priestesses too." The hyena watched Lunaris flinch at that, knowing already that his means of becoming free again, and especially the freedom of the other priestesses, was most certainly not common knowledge. The two guards looked dumbstruck. "Queen's lover is giving important gift to Asuna people already so we is not wanting payment for him. No payment equal what Alps is doing for Asuna people. But... he is not just walking back to Diera. He is needing help to get back. All Lyat can say. Will not say more in front of any but queen or councilor Misty. The Asuna are bound to Last of Letai in this way. Bound by our word to serve him now, until mission is over. Lyat and Reika's life is belonging to him now. Amanian threat of harm and death is being meaningless." The hyena made sure to darken his tone and make sure the wolf knew he was serious.

"The white-furred servant of the queen's?" one of the guards asked.

"What would they want with him? What priestesses?" the other guard asked. Lunaris, who was swaying a bit in apparent stunned dread at what the hyena had said, snapped at the girls.

"Enough! You repeat none of that. I was serious about your deaths. Your lives have just become moot in light of that information if you should pass it to anyone else! Understood?" he barked. They girls both gasped and nodded, seeming even more mystified by it. Lyat smiled a little at this. This would dominate their discussions privately for a long, long time, he was sure. Lunaris looked back at Lyat and growled,

"How am I to know you were not able to make him talk about those things? How do we know he was not tortured?" he asked.

"Alps is never betraying friends!" Reika shouted, to Lyat's immediate surprise. Even Lunaris flinched at that. The girl Asuna continued. "Only weak person is betraying! Alps is strong Letai! He is rather die, or worse, be Shadowfallen before is bringing hurt to any friends! Even Asuna!" she shouted furiously, her voice echoing. "Reika breaks any who dare say otherwise!" Lyat cut her off.

"Enough!" he did not want her to actually say he had been Shadowfallen already. This would only complicate matters before they could get the crystal into the queen's hands, and if anyone here was not able to be trusted, it would further implicate the Asuna in helping his escape or even risk losing the crystal. Their mission would fail. The dark lupine looked hard and long at the indignant, protectively fuming Reika. He then lowered his head in submission to her slightly, and nodded, with a slight smile.

"A little passionate about the slave... He does seem to have that effect on those

he becomes friends with. Come with me. I will let you speak with the queen, but you have to leave your weapons with the guards here.” Lunar is indicating the cowering lady guards who had not expected Reika’s furious outburst. Their captain had just told them she could kill them both easily. Reika clutched Bone and shook her head. Lyat sighed softly. Separating her from Bone was not something he wanted to think about the whole trip.

“Sorry Reika, it’s only fair. We would not have let armed Amani near Rios, would we?” he asked. She growled.

“Bone is not weapon.” She gritted her teeth.

“Close enough to one though. Don’t worry, they won’t hurt him.” Lyat said comfortingly. Lunar is looked puzzled, and then a little worried at Reika. The elder hyena knew that it had dawned on him that he was now taking a mentally unstable Asuna to meet the queen.

“Don’t worry. You have my word, they will not so much as pluck a feather from it.” Lunar is finally stated. Reika very reluctantly gave up the club and crossed her arms, fretting as Lunar is lead them into the castle.

The two Asuna were lead to a small room to sit and wait, as gaining audience with the queen was not so simple as just walking up to her and saying hi. Lyat was already aware of it. The Amanians were very serious about procedure and they would need to have plenty of guards present to deal with the two Asuna and discourage them if there was anything amiss with their message that might be seen as a threat to the queen. During his wait, he got to enjoy Reika’s fears of being without her bone club.

“They is licking him, Reika knows it...” she said at one point.

“They is not.” Lyat replied.

“They is putting him in water and smudging his face.” Her hands were wringing in fear of this possibility. “Reika never gets it just right again.”

“Reika, quit, he’s fine. You smash people in the face with him and wipe his features off with fighting all the time.” Lyat said.

“Reika is having Bone’s okay to doing that! Bone is wanting to smash face for Reika! He says!” she flailed a bit.

“They have no reason to do anything to Bone. And they are afraid of Lunar is. They won’t do it.” Lyat sighed a bit. He hoped the wait wasn’t long. This was not pleasant for him.

“What if they is deciding they love Bone? He is being smooth and silky and clean

and strong... He is feeling wonderful in girl's hands, and they get ideas, yes? Bone is being irresistible." Reika said, her voice squeaking with concern. Lyat flattened his ears at that, wilting a bit at the mental image, not of the wolf guards fondling the bone club, but at the cause that Reika might have to even consider it. Fortunately, he did not have to listen to her continue, because Lunar is finally came and retrieved them both. After a little while of wandering through some of the halls, he became aware that the castle was a bit more complex and large than the slightly more utilitarian palace he called home. There were luxurious rugs that felt soft under his feet, and beautiful tapestries depicting important people and places and events hanging on every wall. There were bright torches and flickering candles that cast light upon everything, and shiny metal fixtures on every clean and heavy door. Even the hinges were bright and polished. He'd never seen such luxury in his homeland. The Amani valued the appearance of power as much as the Asuna valued the use of it. There were surprised faces of course, everywhere that he and Reika were led, and at some points he wondered if they even had to be taken through such a round-about course, or if they were being shown to people in the castle to get everyone on their toes and make sure people were ready in case things went poorly.

Finally, they arrived at a pair of large double doors with the glittering gold royal crest emblazoned upon them both. As they swung open, he realized that he'd been taken directly to the queen's throne room instead of a meeting hall, and there was a very worried-looking and very lovely green-furred lupine sitting upon that throne. Lyat was immediately able to tell this was Nidaja's sister, it was unmistakable. He felt miserable suddenly about the news and "gift" he would be bringing her. Reika moved behind him a little as she looked at the others that were in the room with the queen. There were two very strong looking guards, one with black fur, and one with grey, armed and looking quite ferocious. There was a gold-furred lady wolf with long hair and fluffy fur and thin-rimmed glasses standing beside the queen. Off to her other side was a very pretty lupine with a striking appearance. Her fur was as pure white as Alps' own. Lunar is moved over beside Misty, and nodded to the pair of Asuna.

"You may speak now, but please, keep to important topics, the queen is very busy." The dark-furred male said in a serious and symbolic tone.

"We is Lyat.." the male Asuna pointed to himself, "... and Reika." He pointed to his sister. Reika moved behind her brother a bit. The queen was powerful, and Reika showed understanding of that, as required by her custom. "We is servants of Rios Dominis, Empress of the Asuna people. We come here with her permission, but we is being asked to come by Letai, Alps. Is being by his request we is standing here now." Lyat paused, seeing the queen look up to speak.

"What makes you think he's Letai?" she asked. The hyena paused a moment. She knew, right? Or was it simply not believed yet? Alps had seemed to find it hard to believe. He certainly had all the proof right there with him.

"We is hearing rumor of one who is Shadowfallen by agent of Mannus, assassin

attempting upon life of the Queen.” Lyat nodded to Nita, who shifted a bit, her violet-colored robes remaining neat and tracing her form beautifully. She seemed very nervous about such a rumor getting out. Lyat knew she should be, though. Mannus would surely see to investigating such a claim, and it was important that she find some way to cover it up. “We is hearing he is getting out. None but Letai would be strong enough, and even no Letai is known to do that. So we is asked to find him and bring him by Empress herself!” There was a pause, and some murmuring back and forth between Misty and Nita, and then the queen looked off behind Misty and her throne, and spoke again.

“Are they the ones?” Nita asked. A slender, tan, short-furred lupine female slipped out from behind the throne. Lyat looked up at her. He recognized her immediately as being the one who was with Nidaja when he first met her, sent back to tell the queen what was going on. She nodded to Nita fearfully.

“I didn’t see the girl back then, but she took him in some kind of weird boat. The guy though, he’s the one Nidaja fought. She went with him.” Neit explained. Nita spoke up.

“Where did you take Nidaja?” She drummed her fingertips with some irritation on the throne. It was obvious she did not like having Asuna in her throne room. She had the same bias that her sister had thankfully managed to get over. The future would be hard for the Asuna and the Amanians if everyone was so dedicated to disliking their people, but this was damage done to their people by Mannus and their own fear. He forgave the queen for her obvious disgust.

“She is went with me to get Alps back.” Lyat tried to speak as candidly and openly as he could so it didn’t seem like he was hiding anything, but he still feared having to tell the queen what happened. Alps trusted him, however, with this task, so he’d have to do it. “Reika is took him to Rios, in palace, so Lyat is took Nidaja there.”

“They went to Asuna capital?” Misty asked incredulously. Lyat knew, from Alps’ description of her, that she’d be curious about everything she could learn about the city and its people.

“Yes. Is went there to meet Rios, and Lyat is took Nidaja to get him back. Nidaja and Alps is being ready to leave together, but Uruk is found out, and even though talking was good between Nidaja and Rios, and is talked about making better future for both Asunas and Amanis... Uruk is coming to city and was no way out of city for Nidaja and Alps.” Lyat spoke of this regrettably. There were fearful gasps in the room, and panicked murmurs. Nita bolted up, looking immediately horrified and anguished.

“The Uruk took them?! No!” She pointed at Lyat. “You foolish creatures! That wolf was more important than you could ever realize!” her voice echoed unnaturally. Misty scooted away from her about ten feet. The white-furred lupine female moved over toward Lyat, standing between him and the queen a moment, then to the side a little,

motioning to him.

“Nita Razelle knows essence attacks, Lyat of the Asuna. Be careful not to anger her with such talk.” she stated. “Alps *is* very important, as she said. You already claim you know he is Letai, so you know this is true. What happened? You said that you came to bring him back, but that he needed help to get here. That tells me that the Uruk didn’t take him because if they had there would be nothing left for us to go get.” The lady’s words were soft, smooth, and intelligent. She had a very matronly feel to her, feeling even more like a leader than the obviously younger Nita did. She seemed to have the ability of a diplomat, calming everyone no matter what the circumstance. Lyat was glad that she had a level head, whoever she was. She at least understood that Alps wasn’t dead at this point. Nita calmed visibly, and there were some worried sighs in the room. The black-furred female guard was busily clutching and releasing the handle of a particularly vicious-looking hand-axe. He cleared his throat, as the others watched on with anguished expressions. It was already as bad as he suspected it would be, and it was only going to get worse, he thought.

“There is being no escape from city, and Uruk is made to see essence users, so is no hiding. No way out for Alps and Nidaja.” Lyat continued his story. “Alps is learning much from Asuna books about Essence, and Rios is even teaching him some about essence. He is fast becoming powerful essence user in Asuna city, is surprising even Empress herself.” Lyat said.

“Then... He fought his way through the Uruk?” the white-furred lupine asked softly, the sound of hope and awe in her voice. Lyat even thought that he detected a little bit of pride. He looked at her, not wanting to say it directly to Nita, and not knowing who the lady was. This was the hardest fight he’d ever had. The white-furred lady wolf motioned to him. “It’s alright, you can talk about it.” Her tone was very soothing and pleasant. “I’m Luna, a high priestess of the Letai. I’m among those who Alps freed from the Shadowfall.” Lyat widened his eyes at this a little. This explained a lot about why she seemed so calm and elegant and proper. The Letai were legendary for it. Yes, she would be perfect to tell this to, as she knew that Alps could escape again, since she saw him do it already. This might diffuse the situation Lyat had been dreading. It was Nita, however, who spoke up.

“The next words out of your mouth had better be a location where we can go get my beloved or so help me they will be picking spots out of the tapestries in here for years to come.” Her words were dark, trembling with dread at what could have befallen her fiancé. Lyat looked at Nita, then back at Luna, and swallowed, before taking out the crystal that was in the same pouch he’d been keeping his traveling blanket, carefully and safely rolled up. He held it up.

“Alps is being in here, your majesty.” Lyat spoke earnestly, doing exactly as Nita instructed. He did not dare defy her in front of the priestess, as even she would not be able to help him for his direct disobedience in her presence. Reika ducked down a little instinctively. Nita looked, wide-eyed, at the crystal. Luna stared fearfully at it too, much

as someone who has a phobia of snakes might look at one of those when presented one suddenly. The whole room was quiet, save for soft whimpering from the two lady guards who seemed near tears. Lyat gritted his teeth. Was Alps so close to everyone in the entire room? Had it been more than just Nidaja? Even Misty, who Alps had said was so calm and level, looked like she was prepared to slit the hyena's throat.

There was a very chilling, awkward silence as Nita stood there, looking at the crystal. The hyena knew he would not be able to ever forget the queen's face as he gazed upon it, her ears flat and eyes wide, lips drawn with little discernable expression. The most striking feature however, her pupils were mere points on those round pools of violet. It was horrifying to look at. Lyat carefully put the crystal down in front of the throne before backing away slowly, not wanting to seem like he was attacking the queen with it. It rested, cold and lifeless at her feet. The chilling silence continued, the queen just staring at the crystal, the points of her pupils having followed the object as Lyat put it down in front of her. She then looked up at Lyat, those points seeming to snap to him like magnets, and she held up one quivering hand, palm facing him. Lyat's sister called out fearfully to his defense.

"Your majesty, Asuna is not doing this to him, Alps is doing this himself. To save Asuna! If him and Nidaja is being found in Asuna city, Uruk murder everybody! He is not letting it happen! He is going into the crystal with Nidaja! He is saying he can get back out!" the girl yammered. She could tell that an attack was coming. She knew rage and uncontrollable fury when she saw it, Lyat was sure. He cursed himself for having forgotten to say that part before showing them the crystal. Of course they would think the Asuna did it. Then again, what were the chances that Nita would even believe him? Lyat spoke up himself.

"Is true, majesty! Alps is doing this willingly, and is telling Asuna to bring crystal to you!" he held his hands out to show he held nothing, reminding her that he was unarmed. The white-furred priestess whispered incredulously,

"Oh shit..." Those were not words the Asuna warrior expected to hear from the refined priestess, but it was a good indication of the danger. Nita's arm trembled heavily, still pointed at the hyena as Lyat felt the pressure in the room go up sharply, his ears popping from it. This was bad.

"DIE!" came an echoing shout from the powerful and enraged Amanian queen, and a brilliant flash ignited in front of her outstretched palm, still facing the two dumbstruck hyenas, and the dazzling, almost white-hot ball of fire was launched. Lyat knew dodging would not even help. He would not want to survive any contact with that even if he could, so he inwardly just apologized to Rios for not coming back and Reika for letting her experience such a thing. At least Alps made it home. He had completed his mission.

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The day was absolutely gorgeous, even if just a figment of the mind of the general who created this world inside the Shadowfall. The sun was shining. The soft wind blew in just as Alps remembered from the sea, in between the narrow alleyways leading down to the docks. Every detail made the place feel real. That was the power of the Shadowfall's design. It was made to feel as real as possible. The wolf was led along by the excited Nidaja, who took the time to talk about all the places that she might consider for the act she had in mind, all the while leading him toward the one that, without any input from him, she'd decided on already.

The trip was pretty long of course, since the castle was situated a little way outside and above the city and the city itself was massive, but eventually Alps and Nidaja found themselves at the docks. After a short jaunt along the oceanfront, they padded back to the main thoroughfare of shops and restaurants, a place with which Alps was very familiar. Nidaja and Misty often took him here when running errands. He had sampled some of the finest cuisine that Diera had to offer here. He immediately got the feeling he knew where Nidaja was taking him. One of her favorite places to go in the evening, due to the bards and the dancers and minstrels that performed there, was a tavern called the Sea Lantern. It was not the most luxurious place, but it was a favorite of the locals, and it was always busy any time it was open. Now, it was open, but there was no one there. The general stopped short, marveling at the detail of her memory, and at the complexity of the Shadowfall's representation of it all. There was food on many of the tables, just as if people should have been there, eating.

"Seriously? Even food? Is it edible?" the general asked. Alps nodded to that in reply.

"Yes. It's probably just as good as you remember too." The wolf wandered over and took a nice long draught of wine. It was a far cry from the danger they had been facing not very long ago. Despite it being a personal hell, there was nowhere else in the world safer for them than this. No one could follow them here. The green-furred lady wolf scooped up a thick slice of pie, made with sweet, well prepared fruit and covered in sweet spices and crystallized sugar. She took a bite and crooned happily about it, munching on the slice. Alps leaned back, sipping his wine.

"Oh, I have to admit, I am a bit sore at you for making me think you suffered here. This place is not so bad, Alps." Nidaja said, swallowing down her dessert. The white slave lupine laughed a bit at that and rumbled,

"Well, you would not want to be here for eternity I am sure. It would get awfully lonely. Besides, my ability to work the essence of the nether is the only reason we can break free of the illusion of suffering this place creates, otherwise you would have spent forever thinking you were the last survivor of the Amani empire and even when you realized that you were not aging, or your attempts to off yourself failed, there would not



be any way to get out. It's a brutal place to be trapped, but I can't think of a more fitting 'screw you' to give to Mannus than for the two of us to enjoy this place." Alps laughed with Nidaja quite heartily at that as he walked over to the main stage in the middle of the tavern main room. It was a huge stage, half-circle in shape, with rows and rows of benches around it where people watched performers. In Nidaja's memory, a battle scene was set up, perhaps for some kind of epic hero's tale.

"We will get out though, right?" Nidaja asked, stepping close to Alps as he leaned over the stage, looking it over. He never really got a chance to get a close look at it. The white lupine turned and smiled to Nidaja.

"I am certain of it. We just have to get a little energy built up, like last time. I felt the crystal change with each time... I am sure I can do it again." Alps was not so sure, really, but he could not let Nidaja's hope waiver. He had to have it. In the end, it was the hope of the priestesses that helped to get him out. Alps looked back over to the well-crafted battle-scene on the wooden stage floor. "This was the place you wanted to come to try to build up that positive essence?" Alps asked, indicating the tavern. "A special room here, or someplace nice and cozy that you have wanted to get your hands on?" he looked around.

"Nope." Nidaja wagged her tail briskly, grinning as the white slave heard the soft clink of one of her fasteners to her leather armor release. He looked back to his lover, and swallowed as the carapace of her leather cuirass fell heavily to the floor in front of the stage, leaving her in her leather plated skirt and her white, silky blouse. Alps murmured softly,

"Oh... You mean right here in the main room." The slave blushed heatedly as he backed up a little, sitting on the edge of the stage.

"Right on the stage, in fact... I wish to be right in the middle, where everyone would see us if we played. There is no more public place, and even if no one's gonna walk in on us, we will remember doing this here, every time we see a minstrel play or watch the drama unfold in this place. I have secretly fantasized about doing this to you here over many a third or fourth cup of ale, I promise." Alps' ears went more scarlet at that, and he carefully, casually removed his tunic, folding it absentmindedly on the edge of the stage as he watched Nidaja crawl to the middle, sultrily moving herself as she looked back over her shoulder to Alps.

"You are a lot more adventurous than most who meet you will ever give you credit for." Alps said as he kicked his trousers off. He was embarrassed given the scene, but he was more than willing to bring this pleasure to Nidaja. "Is there a particular act you wish to elaborate on in this, the main stage?" the wolf asked teasingly. The general moved to the middle and got on her knees, facing Alps, wagging her tail slowly as she gazed at him wistfully. Alps watched as she pulled off her blouse and revealed her generous, round, perfect breasts, bouncing softly as she tossed the shirt away. Her fingertips fiddled with the straps of her plated skirt, eyes still locked on him

hungrily. The now undressed slave made note of the fact that his lover's nipples were already obscenely perked. She was aroused highly by just where she was. She really had been thinking a lot about this.

"Alps... no one else is here... What I want from you is what I have wanted for a long, long time. No witnesses, no regrets, no pretending." Her words were already breathless as she seemed to tremble even just thinking of it. The slave paid close attention to every word Nidaja said, as this was as private a thing as she could ever tell him.

"Yes, beloved?" he offered, slipping close. He would dedicate himself entirely to her pleasure in this place. It was not merely what was needed; it was what he genuinely wanted. After all, Nidaja had been the one to bring Alps into a world filled with adventure, good food, warm compassion, love and tenderness. There was a forever-debt to the general he knew he could never fully repay as long as he lived, even if he could spend an eternity in this place trying.

"Alps, I want you to take me." the general said very deliberately. "I don't mean hold me close and make love, I don't mean serve my every need and bring me soft and wonderful pleasure, Alps. I want you to attack me, pin me down, and fuck me until I can't take you anymore." Her words were under bated breath, the lady lupine on her hands and knees, bristling with hungry fury as she looked at the slave and asked him for something very base and primal.

"I'm... a slave so I am not really used to being so... forceful." Alps rubbed the back of his head, but he could not deny (or hide) how quick his already tingling cock was filling out, swelling with eagerness to deliver just what Nidaja wanted.

"Alps, you aren't a slave here. You are a Letai essence user. You are stronger than me. I can't get out without you. My life is completely in your control, just as yours was in my control the day I freed you from Chana. This time, you freed me from my forever-suffering, and I want to give myself to you, but I want you to hold nothing back. I want to feel how much you want me. How much we want to escape together. I want to feel your body against mine, rough, hot, hard... Can you do that?" Nidaja asked, her tail flitting back and forth over her back. The white lupine swallowed reflexively. Oh yes. He could do that. The more she talked about it, the harder it was to not do it. He smiled at Nidaja and murmured,

"I shall be as grateful for this as you are, I can assure you..." and with that, he got on his knees in front of Nidaja, looking longingly into her eyes, naked before her, aroused, drawing in the scent of her own tangy arousal. Without another word, he put his hands into her shoulders and literally slammed the wolf general back on the stage, enough that one of the tacked on stars fell off the painted night sky. She barked in surprise, and then rapturously whimpered out,

"Yis, love! Oh you have the idea!" her legs parted and her feet planted on the

stage as Alps looked at his tackled lover, her ponytail laying over her breasts, her chest already rising and falling quickly. Alps looked into her eyes, looking serious and severe as he could. He rumbled softly.

“Nidaja, you are mine now, for as long as I have you here, and I intend to make you remember how this felt every time you close your eyes...” he moved his hands to her wrists, pulling them over her head as his thick masculinity patted down on her lower tummy, the wolf leaning over her. “And every time you sit down.” Those words came out in a severe growl, but his teeth were bared in a smile, not a snarl. He was enjoying this. The lovely lady wolf struggled playfully. The slave knew she was capable of more strength, but she wanted this genuinely.

She gave out another hot squeak as he lowered his body over hers again, and this time, his teeth came to the point where her neck and shoulder met, and he gave a secure and longing bite. The general gasped, arching a bit, and Alps gripped her wrists tightly, holding them in place. She gave a sweet, begging whimper, and the wolf moved his knees forward, ears folded back, trying to look as powerful and sincere in his role as possible. This was incredible to Alps. He was playing, acting out his part on the most well-known stage in Diera, and he was finding that he loved the feeling of force and power over his lover, even knowing that everything he did was in the dedication of her happiness and pleasure.

Alps slipped an arm under the lady’s shoulders, and boosted her chest up a bit, his hot mouth closing lustfully over one of those heavy mammaries as they were lifted to his reach by his ensnaring embrace. He suckled eagerly, likely painfully at one of those ridged tits, rolling it against his tongue tightly before taking it between his teeth and giving a sharp, vicious squeeze. This made Nidaja cry out. That sent a little shock of fear through the wolf, who lifted his head, panting as he looked with concern at Nidaja.

“N..No, keep going.. Unnh..” the general shifted lewdly against him, smearing her soaking petals against his strong thigh. Alps was shocked at the sheer amount of slick wetness she glazed him with. He knew that Nidaja wanted to see him a bit forceful, but he was not prepared for just how much she appreciated it. The white wolf panted softly, and mauled the opposite breast as he had the first, giving a bite to that supple, mouth-filling flesh, clutching it heavily, painfully with one hand while drawing his muzzle back, teasing and nipping the teat with his teeth and hearing Nidaja cry out again. He gave her a vicious little shake in his arms, pulling himself tight against her, and grinding his thigh into her wet sex again, marking his fur in her scent intentionally. Alps then reared up a bit, putting a hand on that rising and falling chest, clutching an offered breast and gazing intently into his lover’s eyes.

“I don’t... know why we waited so long... for this...” he panted. “I wish I had known how nice it felt... to know I can do whatever I want to you... just because I can.” Alps huffed happily as he slipped his hands under Nidaja’s knees, pulling them up. She gasped a bit as the wet tip of his masculinity prodded against her soaking, puffy folds. He was normally given to slowly pleasuring his lover with his tongue, bringing her to a

happy climax before even trying to tend to his own pleasure, but that was not what she wanted this time. Alps had to be a little selfish now! He had to show her he cared about what he wanted, and *she* was what he wanted. The wolf pulled her forward heavily and speared her deeply with his already aching pink lupine flesh.

Nidaja gave a sinking, joyful cry of deepening pleasure as she felt her lover take her so forcefully. He pulled her hips snug against his own, driving his length as deep into the twisting, writhing general as he could, lifting her haunches off the floor with the force of his rolling penetration. She moved a hand up to her chest, clutching her breasts, toying with her nipples as the wolf took her. Alps watched in awe for a moment even as he drove himself deeply, steadily into his moaning lover. He wanted to remember the face she was making, surprised and excited and thrilled beyond words, it seemed. The whole while she squeezed her lover tight in her willing body and it felt like an internal hand was wringing him, encouraging the gift he wanted very much to give, but it was his gift to take this time. He pulled her haunches against his own, and began to buck his hips hard and aggressively, shaking her body. She yipped out with each impact, her back scooting back and forth against the floor. The general slapped a hand down on the hardwood floor of the stage and her claws raked loudly back and forth against the glossy wood.

“Nnnh! Ahahhh! Alps, oh great stars, aaahh!” Her white wolf lover smiled mirthfully, unable to keep his tail from wagging even as his hips slammed into hers. This was the most forceful, almost criminally violent thing he’d ever done to someone, and it was utterly delicious to him because of how wonderfully Nidaja reacted. How long had she liked this? Was this as new to her as it was to him? He was sure he would enjoy doing this again if they had the chance, and even then he knew it was something Nidaja would want again.

Her cries only doubled his determination, and he opened up to a rapid, desperate pace, shaking his lover with the force of his now fevered pistoning strokes. Alps closed his eyes, tongue hanging out, panting raggedly. Never as a slave had he used this much strength and endurance! He had never been given cause to burn off energy so fast, but it felt so good, that wet inner flesh of his lupine lover suckling at his meat as his heavily throbbing cock slipped wetly, noisily in and out of her. Alps got so lost in the moment of just focusing on how hard he could take the pretty wolf general that he wasn’t aware of the toll it was taking on the general’s senses until he felt the familiar, welcome wet squeeze, that sudden clench of her body just before a splash of wet heat in his lap, snapping him back into the moment as she wailed with climax around his still rapidly bounding length of wolf flesh. Alps grunted loudly, and gritted his teeth, only speeding up as Nidaja wailed pitifully in furious release!

“Oh I-love! Oh this is wonderful... I feel so – ahaah!”

The wolf growled loudly as he rather suddenly rolled Nidaja, his cock twisting wetly inside her still spasming depths, pulling her onto her hands and knees, cutting her off mid-sentence.

“...Not done with you yet!” the slave barked, panting raggedly. He wanted to keep feeling that pleasure, and enjoying his lover, but his muscles were already burning from the force he was taking her with. There seemed to be a limit to just how much of this he could give her. The wolf made a point to practice and get better at it, grinning sadistically at the thought. Nidaja whimpered heavily, still shaking with climactic aftershocks. Alps grabbed the base of the green-furred lady’s tail and tugged her against his hips hard as he tightened himself up on his knees.

“Yes love... anything you desire...” came the plaintive offer from Nidaja as her lover pulled her into position in front of him, his thick pulsing masculinity still spreading her wide around him.

“It’s my turn now, love...” the slave growled, pulling her tail back to sink himself in her, and then pushing her hips away, then pulling her back again. “Back into me... hard... fast... make me cum... I want to fill you, Nidaja... I want to take what’s mine.” The slave gasped a bit as he felt a hard squeeze from the wolf in front of him as he said the word ‘mine’.

“Aaahaaaallps!!!” she wailed helplessly. She climaxed again, just at that. She had perhaps not been ready for how forceful he would be for her, but her sudden collapse into climax was not at all unwelcome. Nidaja’s back sank down and she just squalled as she gushed over Alps’ rock-hard cock. Her lover smiled a bit, and decided to really play into it now, since she was pretty much putty in his hands.

“What are you doing, Nidaja, move your ass, it’s my turn, not yours again!” the white male snapped, raising a hand and whapping the general’s backside with a loud ‘crack!’. This was something he learned was fun when he was traveling as Nidaja when they had switched minds from the mindwalk sphere, but would she enjoy it done to her? He got his answer as she rose up on all fours and slapped her hindquarters into his lap hard, beginning a brisk, hot, passionate pace of breeding back into him. The male folded his ears back, the slkslkslkslk of his cock pistoning in and out of her with no effort at all utterly heavenly to him.

“Love... yes... please...!” she panted, exerting herself heavily for Alps. He’d never seen her so desperate, and as her honey pooled at his aching knees, he found he’d never seen her so wet. She pitched herself hard into him as he held her tail, and slapped her tight, strong ass again, giving her no quarter as she shook a bit, trembling. By how she was shaking, Alps knew what was happening.

“Don’t you pop again, Nidaja, I haven’t cum yet!” he barked, feeling a little odd but wonderful in their reckless play. How forceful could he be with her? Would she be insulted? Would it matter right now with how hard she was cumming for him?

“I can’t help it!” she cried, and Alps gave her another across the other ass cheek.

“Don’t do it!” he barked loudly, grinning even as angry as he sounded, feeling his pleasure rising. It would not be long now. Nidaja huffed loudly, thumping her ass into his lap, the wet splashing sound of his cock slipping, suckled, in and out of that tightly clutching channel a delirious, lewd, messy affair.

“Ahhaaa! Aaaallps! Please!” she cried. Alps slapped her again, and then snatched her bouncing ponytail, pulling her head back.

“Harder!” he barked, his voice as commanding as he had ever heard it. He really had changed a bit since he had been forced to wander around as the general of the Amanian army, and she was getting to see just what it was like. Unfortunately for the poor lady general, that last bit of hard dominance from Alps might have been a little over the top for her expectations, because she just curled up with her face in her arms, bearing her rump hard into the wolf as her sex clutched vice-like around him. She trembled a few short jerky times, and then just screamed with her face buried in her arms, her body arching as she exploded around him. The male wolf still held her ponytail tight. Alps cried out from how painfully tight she went around him, and began to lay into her backside with a strong, solid swatting hand. Whap-whap-whap-whap!

“Nuuu! Ah stars and stones, love, I can’t... I can’t... aAAAAHHH!!” she gushed helplessly again, in a plateau from one climax to the next as Alps tanned her ass with passion. He was almost there... He had to get her to keep moving!

“Make me cum, Nidaja! I’m close... I *want* you!” he ordered, the quaking general a mess in front of him, whimpering, not even budging with the spanking he was giving her. Alps pinned his ears back, feeling that welling sense of need. Now. He needed it now! He got onto his feet, kneeling behind Nidaja, his body over hers as he pulled her haunches up, and just did what came naturally.

Hard. Fast. Base. Primal, he fucked the sobbing, climaxing general beyond her body’s own limits as he burned his muscles more and more, pitching himself hard into her as his toes gripped into the wood, splattered and soaked with his lover’s tangy honey. A little more... A little more... He felt her go tight again. Even as she tightened up, he pounded harder, shaking her ferociously against the stage as he gave her everything he had, and more. And then the wolf threw his head back and howled in victory as he felt the bolt of pleasure rush through him, spewing thick, heavy rope after clinging sticky streamer of his steamy spunk hard inside her suckling, clenching, squeezing sex. Alps doubled over her, shaking as he clamped his jaws over her shoulder, making her cry out in pain again. She shook desperately, gripping nearly painfully on his cock again. Her gushing lover groaned out furiously through his nose as the pinching tightness of her pussy held his cock so hot inside her, making it splash into her in one forceful pulse after another, spraying those seemingly endless torrents of his lust into her gladly receiving depths. It was obviously hard enough for her to feel him soaking her inner walls as she barked out in surprise and pleasure.

The entire time she was crying and pitching back into him and squirming beneath

him, Alps could feel the happy bursts of energy around him, more attuned to it now than ever before. How could he have ever missed it before? He could feel the energy rising around him so easily now. He wondered if it was just the training, or a combination of that and his being more sensitive to it naturally in this place. Even as he wondered he drew upon it hungrily, letting the general enjoy him completely as he enjoyed her, but not letting any of that heat and power escape. He simply brought it to himself, making it a part of himself as best he could, based on what Rios had told him. Drinking of Nidaja's energy just as she drank of him in a very different fashion was a delight he knew he would partake of often. Alps sighed happily, heavily, and sank to his knees behind the general again with a final clunk, only to gasp as Nidaja collapsed heavily, fully, onto the floor in front of him in a panting, wheezing, twitching heap of barely-conscious pretty emerald wolf female. Alps looked at Nidaja with some concern, before she finally whimpered out,

“Ah think he likes me...” and giggled stupidly. Her lover gazed at her happily, rubbing the back of his head, panting heavily himself, dizzy, happy, but strangely full of life even despite it all. He stretched out alongside Nidaja, his body pressed tight to hers, and embraced her, content to stay here with her as long as it took. He secretly hoped that, even though she was in a hurry to be free of this place, she would ultimately feel their vacation here had been far too short. The general's happy memory of being Shadowfallen would be a bizarre insult to Mannus' darkest creation.

**Sirius, Book III**  
*The Essence*

*Comments or Questions?*

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Or just drop a note at: <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/sarsis/>

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**Chapter 15**

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The horrible flash of pain that Lyat thought would end his life, and his sister's, never happened. He looked up from a flinch he would later vehemently deny ever happened, and saw a green haze in front of him. Stunned, he looked around himself. Were they dead already? He then spotted a figure in the haze with them. The white-furred priestess had her hand out, and a dome of greenish fog had wrapped around the pair of Asuna. It had stopped the fireball from sending them as charred meat and bones out into the hall. Lyat sighed heavily, realizing that he had not started breathing again right away and finding with some surprise that the mist smelled kind of like honeysuckle. On top of saving his life, it smelled nice too? The mist faded, and he saw Nita on the throne, and everyone else looking stunned. The queen clenched her fists, fuming at the priestess.

"Gah! Why would you do that?!" the queen shouted at Luna. The white lupine female waved her hand and the mist dispersed like smoke in the kitchen. The priestess looked at the trembling Reika, then back at Nita.

"If Alps did send them here to give us his crystal, if they are telling the truth, he would probably be unhappy to learn that you vaporized the two he sent." The priestess spoke softly, her voice still calm. Lyat made a mental note to wash this lady's feet or something to show his gratitude if he were given the chance. The force of that fireball was equal to any his Empress could have thrown, so to stop it with that kind of ability certainly verified the white-furred female's power. Nita clenched her fists, seeming to think about that hard. Reika leaned in, whispering into Lyat's ear.

"Reika is nearly ruined her clothes..." Her words were whispered, seeming to suggest that such a thing really had very nearly come to pass. He could certainly understand.

"Luna, you believe them?" Misty asked the priestess, still trembling. Lyat looked back up at the priestess. She was still incredibly level-headed and calm. This was a heavenly blessing for the Asuna.

"If they had intended to harm Alps and Nidaja, the Asuna would not have put them in a Shadowfall crystal. Based on what Lyat already said, they already know Alps can get out, and when he gets out, he'd possibly bring very powerful help with centuries of grudges to work out on the likely ill-prepared Asuna people." The priestess explained.



"Besides, I have no trouble believing that Alps would do that if it meant even saving himself and Nidaja, let alone a whole city of uninvolved people." She looked over to Nita with an expression that was a bit scolding. Nita should certainly know what Alps would do in such a situation. Luna moved over to the crystal, but seemed afraid to pick it up or touch it. Lyat could not blame her, if she really had been stuck in there for so long. "I am sure he will get back out eventually. I don't know how he did it last time, but we can't lose hope for him now. It is certainly more of a chance than the Uruk would have given him." Lyat sighed softly, grateful that her calm seemed to prevail. Lyat spoke in gratitude.

"Thank you Priestess. Yes, Alps is trusted us to do this but he is having other reasons for sending Asuna to you. He and Nidaja is wanting an unofficial agreement between Asuna and the Amani. That we is finding some way to work together to slow Mannus down. Maybe together we find some way to stop him from destroying our people completely. This is for good of both our people. Mannus is divided us to make us fight, maybe fears our unity. Our strength. We is having no chance alone. He knows this. Alps was hopeful." Lyat backed up a little again after this speech, and Luna approached him, standing beside him and looking back to the queen. The councilor at the queen's side spoke up, leveling her anger herself.

"Can you afford to throw this away if it is genuine? Think hard, your majesty." Misty was trying to sway the queen's logic, and pull her from despair, showing that she was very similar to the priestess in her level-headedness. The queen finally spoke in a wavering voice.

"Luna, if he can't get out again, if it was some rare fluke due to the power you and the others had or something of that nature, what then?" she asked. "Priestess, you won't even get to tell him who he is... who you are... could you live with losing that opportunity because of the selfish Asuna?" she asked. Lyat arched a brow, thinking there was something that he had not been told concerning the priestess.

"I won't lose that chance. We now know that he *can* get out. I won't stop until he's out, even if he can't get out on his own. You would not either, I know this. There is a way and we will find it even if he cannot." Luna stated. "But, please don't darken the world he's destined to come back to... sooner rather than later, I hope." The priestess was very sincere and planned in her wording. Nita seemed to reflect on this a bit, her eyes closed as she pondered all the things in play. Lyat did not envy her. Being a leader and having to set aside ones emotions for everyone else must have been terribly stressful. The Asuna male hoped that Alps would not take long to return. The queen could certainly use his attention to recover from the stress. His purpose, at least initially, was becoming more apparent. The queen finally spoke up.

"I will accept your will on this, for now..." Nita sat back down heavily in her throne. Reika breathed a sigh of relief. Lyat leaned back a little as well, rubbing the back of his head.

"Well done in bringing him home, Asuna." Luna said. "However, don't think that your kidnapping him is so easily forgiven. There is still that matter. You still have to answer for why it was exactly the Asuna felt the need to borrow Alps and put him in such a dangerous situation to begin with."

"Rios is needed him..." Lyat then cringed, realizing what he was about to explain to the one who might well fireball him again for it. He swallowed again. "...Is being rather complicated." He said softly.

"Tell us." Nita growled. The male Asuna's mind raced, trying to think of the most intelligent, non-selfish way to explain the matter. Tragically, Reika spoke up, seeming to realize that her brother was struggling with it and he could not silence her in time, looking on in horror as she yammered away.

"Rios is not able to have family with other Asunas because Rios is being part Letai herself, like queen of Amani is part Letai, yes? All strong Empress Asunas is part Letai. But! But! Is no other boy Letai Asunas left! Mannus killed *all* of them. All! Regular Asuna is not Letai blood enough to give Rios her family and this is made her sad and afraid for our people. We fall into chaos without strong leaders. She is needed strong boy Letai so she is having her family." Misty and Luna shared a look of distress, though Nita was again expressionless. The girl Asuna continued. "Alps is causing big rumor then and Empress is learning of him, and finding that there is maybe hope! Hope for her and all Asuna people. There is not being sad any more because of Letai boy for her! She just borrows him for this, and she is not keeping him. Not hers to keep, she says, but she needs him just for a bit, so we is send to go find him while the time is right. Time is *perfect*. Future is hopeful for Asuna people again!" Reika said this last happily, nodding. There was certainly nothing unhappy about having a family, after all. Lyat wilted at Reika's rapid, careless explanation of what he knew might be a very sensitive kind of subject. His sister was not likely to understand the emotions that might have been tied to what she had just said.

"So she took him to..." Misty started.

"Have him sire a child for her." Nita finished, that blank expression still on her face.

"Ayup!" Reika barked, wagging. "I helped." Lyat inwardly groaned.

The male Asuna flinched again as he saw a green bubble pop around them. Luna had thrown up her shield quickly, but when he looked up, Nita was just standing there. There was a short, awkward silence.

"Nothing?" Luna asked curiously, seeming a little embarrassed about her quick reaction. "Nothing for that one? Okay." The priestess lifted the shield, fanning the sweet-smelling essence away. Lyat hung his head a little. He was glad for not being vaporized, but Reika had not been at all gentle about the explanation.

"I can't be mad about that." Nita said to Luna. "I am a leader for my people just as she is a leader to hers. If I thought I could not give my people a future, and that my inabilities would cause everything to fall to ruin, on top of not even getting to enjoy the most principle function of being alive... I don't know that I would care what other people thought of what I was doing either. I would do everything to ensure the survival of my empire and my family. I can actually completely understand her feelings on that." Lyat blinked in quiet admiration at the level of understanding Nita showed in that regard. He had not expected her to be alright with it because Alps had seemed to feel she would not be. Perhaps the slave was simply afraid for her feelings a little too much. Or perhaps she saw an opportunity in the situation that he was not thinking of. It did put the Asuna and Amani in a better position to be amicable to one another. If it were something that Nita showed as being permitted to Rios, the Asuna would understand that she wanted their empire to remain strong. One of the greatest hurdles for a lasting peace would be the perception of the Asuna as having surrendered to the might of the Amani Empire. This might relax those fears. The hyena could not be sure what the queen was thinking, however.

"I wish they had just asked then, instead of endangering him." Misty said softly, finally speaking up.

"I don't think that would have occurred to the Empress as a possibility." Luna stated, rubbing her temples. It was a lot to take in.

"Did he do this for her?" Nita asked. Lyat tensed up a bit. They had not actually told the queen yet that Alps had completed the task.

"Not willingly." He answered. This was a bit worse scenario, he thought. She might be genuinely mad that he was forced.

"I had suspected he might not, no." Nita said, frowning.

"But he is understood eventually, seeing how life was being for us Asuna. How we want better lives." Reika offered.

"But he had to be forced first?" Nita asked.

"Yes." Lyat answered. "Is begging that you please forgive our trespass upon him. Rios is knowing that what is at stake was too grave, and time was important." Nita and Luna were both silent, the priestess looking to the queen to measure her reaction, perhaps to decide if she had to keep the hyena from being torched again.

"Mother's moon was growing short." Reika added. The male Asuna rolled his eyes, not needing Reika to further illustrate the timing. He was sure the queen knew that part.

“Did Alps forgive her?’ Nita asked calmly, after a quiet pause.

“Yes.” Lyat answered promptly. “He understood her reasons, and could not disagree, even if the means were somewhat... stressful to him.”

“Then she is forgiven.” Nita’s words were still soft, but rather resigned. Lyat sighed again, relaxing a little. He had not expected this conversation would go well at all, originally dreading that it would be Alps explaining it, not him. However, Lyat actually felt better that he had been the one to say it, because it relieved Alps of the discomfort of bringing it up. He was sure it would not have been easy for the young slave. The queen continued. “Though he’s a slave and might not agree, it’s Alps’ body, not mine. He’s not been given to me just yet, though I have made my intentions known to him. He’s not made any transgressions against me in all this. I am sad that he must worry that he has until he is free.” Nita sat back down on the throne and picked up the crystal, Luna cringing at the queen even touching it. “Guess I will be putting this somewhere less... explodable this time.” The green-furred lupine looked up at her repaired throne, which had been blown apart when Alps escaped the first time. She looked up to Luna and rumbled, “It will be a long wait perhaps, but we will wait however long, as you said. I believe in him too, and now we want both him and my sister back.” The queen glanced back over to Lyat. “You were brave to come, knowing what you were going to have to tell me. You are a credit to your strong, courageous people, Lyat.”

“Reika came too.” The girl Asuna barked. Nita smiled at her, and nodded, acknowledging her bravery too. “Yay! I get Bone back!” and the girl bolted, almost falling on the smooth tile on the other side of the door as she took the corner too sharp, thumping against the wall and thundering down the hall to get her bone club.

“What in the world?” Nita asked, dumbfounded.

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Lyat stood in the rooftop garden that Nidaja had described as one of her favorite places in the castle during their travels. He could see why. It was very decorative and peaceful, and this high up, the scent of the city below that were worth having were magnified, rising and carried on the wind. Bakeries and restaurants, incense shops and perfume stores, all those lovely scents were lifted up, as the less savory scents tended to cling to the ground. There were rows of hedges with flows that offered their sweet scents in chorus with those of the city, and the lovely trees that were neatly placed in their planters towered more than three times his height, despite being confined to their trenches of loamy soil in the roof. It was a marvelous treasure to the castle. He would have to tell Rios about it when he returned.

The hyena padded quietly, barefoot over to the edge of one of the balconies that overlooked the courtyard below. He could see, in the garden behind the castle, the place Nidaja said she used to go to train. He saw the sandy circle she described. Lyat had found himself actually rather missing the general, and he wished she had been here to give him a tour. No one else seemed particularly interested. Nita, while not outright nasty to him, did not seem to want to get to know the hyena better. Lyat could not blame her. He had stolen her love away and made the kind and loving wolf do the unthinkable to himself and the queen's own sister. There was not likely to be a lot of love coming from that direction any time soon.

As he contemplated this, Lyat heard the soft crunch of a foot upon the gritty roof walkway, thin stone lining it to make it sturdy for foot traffic. He turned around, expecting to see perhaps Misty or Lunariss there to ask him more questions, or perhaps to ask that he not let himself be seen by those outside of the castle. His presence was still not being advertised. They didn't want to cause confusion in the city below. Lyat could agree. As he turned around however, he did not see a face he recognized. He saw a creature he'd never before encountered.

The black-furred, white-haired female fox stood, hands behind her back, looking casual, but observant, as if trying to figure out what Lyat was. He looked back trying to figure out what she was. Finally, he remembered some of his lessons from Rios, and the description of the Lhap people. Her eyes haunted him as he gazed back at her. They seemed to lack pupils, and stared right through him. Was she blind.

"Good morning." The hyena was not sure how else to announce his presence to the possibly blind fox. Were there many of her kind in the castle? He had not seen any others. She looked back at him emotionlessly, and he finally spoke up again. "Is I being somewhere I should not be?"

"You will like where you are." Her answer was pure silk, and her words seemed planned, if not absolutely rehearsed, like she was always supposed to come up here, find him, and say that. This made the hyena a little nervous, which to him was not an overly familiar feeling, especially concerning an otherwise not at all threatening smaller creature like this.

"I have found it quite pleasant, yes." The hyena softly admitted his overall impression of the place. He was not sure why it would matter to her. Was she aggravated about the intrusion of the Asuna in her home? Was this her home? She walked over to the balcony and looked down into the garden below.

"You will find it more pleasant soon. The visitors here are rather delightful." Her words seemed almost teasing to the hyena. Lyat walked away from the balcony a bit, looking back in the direction of the crisscrossing hedges and shrubs, not sure if there were other visitors or not.

"Is you being on high council here? I not meeting you yet. Asuna is supposed to

be not talking to many people. No one is knowing we are being here.” He tried to explain the sensitivity of his presence so the fox didn’t spread it around.

“I knew you would be here, or I would not have come.” The fox spoke very softly, but the hyena did not turn. He didn’t want to seem spooked by that, and did not want to seem like he was staring at those eyes, just in case she actually could see him. She continued. “Rios’ instructions for you to bring him here are law to you, yes? So you will stay until he is out of the crystal?” Lyat widened his eyes at that and turned, seeing her perched casually on the stone ledge of the balcony, swinging her feet in relaxed and calm demeanor. A slight lean the wrong way would prove fatal, but she seemed fearless.

“How is you knowing about that?” he asked. She had to be in some way linked to the queen or to Alps. But the white wolf had not said anything about this lady.

“I heard her tell you in the palace when you were wrapping up that crystal. Your sister made such a fuss about it, and yet, I think Reika is having a delightful time here. It’s like a vacation to her, really. You should stay longer. There are still many things to be done.” Her words sent a chill down the hyena’s spine.

“You is not possibly being there at Asuna palace. Is being a private place with many guards.” The Asuna male gestured a bit. The fox chuckled and rumbled lightly,

“Your afternoon guest approaches.” Her words were almost teasing again. Lyat looked up, turning around just in time to see Luna appear from behind one of the hedges. She had some kind of little lizard on her fingertips, letting it squiggle from one hand to the other, marveling at the life that she found in the garden. She looked very elegant and demure there in her flowing green and white robes, her body meticulously groomed. The torches in Nita’s throne room did not do her justice. She spotted Lyat and smiled, transplanting the lizard from her fingertips to one of the shrubs, where it happily took station to wait for its miniscule prey. Lyat bowed to Luna and said in his deep, strong tone,

“Good morning, Priestess Luna. Asuna is being grateful to you for helping, and for saving lives before. Is not being able to thank you properly before.” His spiky crimson hair bounced a little as he leaned back up. “Lhap here is seeming to know you was coming.” He noted, motioning behind him to the vixen.

“Lhap?” she asked curiously, continuing to walk up to him.

“Yes, is lady fox right...” He turned, but the balcony was vacant. He felt a bolt of horror go through him, padding quickly over to the balcony and looking over the edge. Had she fallen? That would be tragic! It was four stories up! No one was in the garden below. Where had she gone? He looked back to Luna, who smiled at him. “She was just here. Black fox lady in robes with white eyes. You is knowing who it is?” he asked.

“Yes, I know who she is. Well, not very well. I haven’t seen much of her since she got out of the crystal.” Luna stated casually, leaning by the balcony by the hyena. So that was it. She did know Alps, but it didn’t explain why she would know what was said in the Asuna capitol. Had she been following Alps, and then followed him back? Lyat looked back up to Luna. Her voluminous and luxurious tail swayed seductively side to side. The shorter-tailed hyena could scarcely keep his eyes off of it. Rios would do that with her tail for him. She knew he was attracted to it. Her Letai blood had gifted her with such features, and Luna seemed to almost intentionally call attention to it. He swallowed softly as the lady wolf explained. He interjected softly,

“So, Lhap is being priestess too? In the crystal? Alps is saved her as well?” He stood reverently before the priestess. She was, in his opinion, even more deserving of his submission than the queen herself. There was real power here, and real hope for his people. He was glad that the story of Alps freeing other Letai had not just been a rumor. It was hard to believe until the moment that Luna had saved him. At that time he knew exactly what she was.

“The fox? I don’t think so. I have no idea why she was in the crystal. After getting out, she made herself scarce. I haven’t seen her in weeks, to be honest.” The priestess shrugged at that. “I had assumed that she went home, wherever *that* would be. There would not be anyone left that she knew, after so long though. Are you feeling alright?” Luna asked. Lyat blinked at that. Her tone suddenly showed a deep caring, almost a worry, her words having been so light and casual just seconds before.

“Feeling... okay?” He was not sure how to answer. He was feeling fine. Was she suggesting that he was not?

“It was a very long trip. Do you need any healing? Were you accosted by guards or Uruk along the way? I am a very capable healer. I rather enjoy the chance to bring physical and emotional peace. It’s my most sacred duty as a Priestess.” Luna’s words were artful and almost serenading. Lyat flicked his round Asuna ears a little. He was fine.

“Asuna is uninjured. We is having very little trouble in our journey. It was being uneventful at worst.” The hyena looked back up into Luna’s eyes, appreciating their beauty, one green and one violet. They stared at him, seeming anxious. Seeming tense and worried. Was he bleeding or something? He stated softly, adding to his admission that he was not hurt, “Asuna is rugged people. They is being able to take a lot of damage.” Luna seemed to relax a little, and then she looked around seeming almost suspicious for a moment.

“This is good, Lyat, this is so very good...” She spoke in her gentle, soothing, motherly words. The hyena felt so safe and comforted in her presence. It was almost hypnotic how gentle she was, and how inviting her company was the moment she was near him. He found it easy to trust her with his very spirit if she needed to hold it for some reason.

That was probably why he didn't predict at all what was coming. She slipped a heavy-looking cudgel wrapped in soft leather from her robes, and he only got to catch a glimpse of it as it moved in a slicing crescent to the side of his head. Fortunately, there wasn't much pain. He was blissfully unaware of pain or anything else after that.

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The spotted Asuna male arched a bit, a little stunned. He was waking up. He was not aware of having fallen asleep. He reached up suddenly, remembering. Luna attacked him! Why in the world would she have done that? Was she really angry about what happened with Alps, and just unwilling to strike him in front of others because of the image that she was trying to maintain? As his hand came to the point where he'd been hit, there was something applied to the side of his head. It was warm and firm. Oh, it was someone's hand. He opened his eyes, a little light-headed. Luna looked down over him.

"Are you alright?" she asked. The hyena didn't answer. She had hit him. Why would she be asking if he was alright? "You lost consciousness due to a slight knock on the head. Fortunately, I am a capable healer." The priestess seemed very proud in saying this. Her tone was back to being motherly and tender, instead of that worried, fretful tone he heard before. She had spoken before with an air of regret, but after hitting him, seemed to have none. What kind of game was this? A capable healer? She hit him. Why was she bothering to heal him?

"What happened?" he asked point blank.

"You were hit on the head." Luna murmured. Her eyes seemed just as kind and soothing and caring as if nothing bad had happened.

"Who is hitting me?" Lyat asked in follow up. He knew, but he didn't know a good way to bring it up at all.

"I do not know. You just went down like a sack of grain." Lyat listened to that answer in stunned silence. He was right there! Why would she deny having done it? He reached up where she had hit him. It didn't hurt. She had healed him already, perhaps while he was unconscious. It still didn't explain why she did it. He sat up a bit. They were still in the garden, but he seemed to have been dragged in between one of the hedgerows. Luna placed a hand on his chest, easing him back down.

"Lyat is being okay." Luna's 'patient' felt well enough to get up. And he was interested in getting away so he could find out what exactly just happened. The motherly priestess whispered softly,

"No, rest. You will get dizzy and fall if you try to leave so soon. I used quite a bit



of my own essence to help you. It would tire me terribly if I had to patch you up again." Her words seemed so genuine. Did she really think someone else hit him? What was wrong with this priestess? She did not seem harmful at all.

"Asuna supposes he can stay a bit. You truly is not knowing who is hit Lyat?" he asked. He kept telling himself she did it, she did it, but the words didn't even make sense now.

"Not a bit. I came up onto the roof garden and found you laying there. I fear not everyone likes the Asuna, so you might have gotten blindsided by a particularly zealous guard. But, I will make sure Nita knows, and you won't have so much as a scar to remember this by." She caressed his chocolaty muzzle and along his brow tenderly and slowly. It was so soothing. Lyat was nearly startled more by the fact that he was slowly not even caring that she hit him, because the healing itself was so pleasant. He swallowed. Essence. She was using essence to calm him. It would certainly explain why he was not thinking about escaping anymore. He found this very curious. The tactically minded Asuna warrior knew that if Luna had meant to really harm him, she had plenty of time while he was out cold to do it.

"Asuna is sorry to have drained more of your power, High Priestess." Lyat decided to resume expressing his gratitude at least to the priestess who saved him and his sister both. He could not afford to make her think she was not appreciated if she were genuinely unstable. "You is being very kind to always help Asuna who is causing so much troubles for the Queen." There was a short silence there as he found himself actually just enjoying the way that Luna stroked his cheeks and his bare chest. He blinked. Bare chest? The hyena lifted his head a little. His shirt had been removed at some point after he was knocked out. He was thankful to see his pants had not been as well. As he dropped his head back, he realized that his shirt was now a pillow. Well, that made sense, kind of.

"It is alright. I was happy to help you. You brought Alps back with considerable risk." Luna resumed sliding her hands over the hyena's strong, broad chest. "I appreciate that, though I will need to draw upon more life essence soon." She smiled at the prone warrior. "Might I have a strong, recently healed and healthy volunteer?" she asked. Lyat widened his eyes a bit. He felt heat rush through his body. Rios, his lover, was an essence user, and he was very plainly aware of how she drew upon life essence in his presence, and the thought of offering the same to the priestess lit his senses on fire. He would be allowed, particularly given that she saved his life, but she had injured him, so it was still not making sense. Still, she had also healed him which did take her own essence energy, and it would not be acceptable etiquette to not replace it in such troubling times. If there were really people in the castle who might wish him harm, having a healer able to help him or his sister would be invaluable. Lyat gave a wandering glance at the priestess, covered elegantly in her robes. They were not exactly revealing, but given the beauty of her visible features, that waving, full and beautiful tail and her youthful but wizened face, he had trouble believing that the body beneath those robes was anything but exquisite.

“For all you is doing to help Asunas,” Lyat spoke finally, “We is certainly in your debt enough to be proud to be assisting you in drawing of essence. Lyat is willing, yes.” He gave his stubby hyena tail a wag of agreement, should the priestess be looking at it. If the pair could make their way back inside, he might at least be able to think of a reason why all this had transpired. Was she crazy, or did she know already how he would react to everything? Was this the only way she might have accomplished what she was after? She glanced around the roof top garden, and then murmured softly,

“Perhaps a bit of cover from prying eyes... such things are a little odd to those who don’t understand...” She held a hand up to the shrubs that lead into the little pathway where they were lying. “Gilrenarthunartir mirelda curosvaldaren...” she practically softly sang in her native tongue, and her fingertips glowed in a soft green light in the waning afternoon sun, barely noticeable, but Lyat could see it. That is when he got another lesson in the potency of Luna’s magic. The shrubs shuffled softly, and then spindles of vine-like growth rapidly erupted from them on both sides, the tendrils meeting in the middle of the path and forming a wall as if the shrubs were supposed to end there all along. The color was a little different as the growth was new, but it offered a concealing green little room for them. Lyat sat up a little. Here? Right in the garden? His dish-like ears swiveled a bit. Had she planned to draw upon his essence all along? Was that what all this was about, or was there something larger going on here?

He did not get very long to try to consider that. He found himself being relieved of his trousers. Luna, on her knees alongside him busied her hands gracefully on the binding of his belt, slipping it free of its snug loops with ease. She worked his pants down casually, hooking her fingers at the waist and shimmying them down his legs. He kicked them away easily enough, and looked back up to the priestess warily. This was very sudden. It was almost alarming not because she was moving so eagerly, but because he could not force himself to be anything but utterly allured. There was no distrust now, no alarm or misgiving. Was he supposed to feel it, or was Luna taking those feelings away from him somehow? Would it matter? He thought he might very much like this even without essence being used to draw him along with the priestess’ will. He gazed up at her again, propping himself up with his hands slightly behind him as he watched. He didn’t say a word as the priestess slid her hands back and forth along his chest, smiling in a very doting and affectionate fashion. She was still so utterly disarming.

“You is okay doing this with Asuna male? Lyat is not being Letai or Amani like others here.” He looked down his body as Luna bared him, his already slightly thickening shaft bouncing against his tummy as the priestess pushed him back. The lupine female looked at her captured prone hyena again with more confidence and affection than the doting motherly expression she had moments ago.

“I am very okay with this, Lyat. Asuna have a lot of energy. They are particularly well suited to this. Now just relax, stop squirming. I have not had a chance to do this in a while, and I have been looking forward to it for weeks. You are scarcely aware of how

nice a treasure strong Asuna happen to be to Letai priestesses if they are so agreeable like yourself.” She gave a delighted chuckle, and softly straddled the hyena. She didn’t have to take off her clothes. She had no trouble providing him with what she had intended. The pleasure of her company would cause his life essence to rise and release, just as his body did. Lyat shifted a bit as he felt his already burgeoning masculinity pinned between him and the velveteen mound of the priestess. His heart leapt at the feel of it. He had assumed this was what she intended from what he knew of his lover at home, but he hadn’t fully considered how intense she would feel against him so immediately. Her beauty and her sensuality, the Letai were suited for it. Perhaps she was even using the essence to make herself more alluring, trapping his senses. Lyat could not be sure. He was sure that it didn’t matter. She would have her way, and he would not argue. She deserved it. She saved both him and Reika, and if this was the payment, he was getting one hell of a deal.

She untied her robes at the middle, and her draping fabric spilled open, letting the hyena have a good look at her motherly form, her proud bosom bouncing a bit as she arched up, leaning back to mish her warmth against his turgid shaft, grinding herself against it softly. She was not immediately wet, but her careful, rolling motion seemed trained to stoke his senses. She murmured softly to her spotted companion.

“I wish to feel your hands upon me, Lyat. I wish it because it is what you long for as well. I watch your eyes. I see where they linger. I know what you want...” her words were so truthful and knowing, and yet, so instigating and provoking. The hyena nodded softly, his hands slipping from his sides to drift up along her own sides inside her parted robes. He moved them up just before her bosom, letting his palms feel the tensing nubs of her nipples trace beneath them. The woman’s eyes closed slowly as he slipped his hands to her shoulders and pushed her robes back, letting them spill down her back to reveal her gorgeous upper body. Her form was perfectly healthy, her shape rounded and curved in an almost artistically perfect fashion. She seemed to be designed very specifically with the Asuna’s idea of a beautiful woman in mind. Was this the case, or did her essence enhance what he saw? He again found himself not caring, and somehow he trusted his eyes. After all, as his hands drifted back down to her chest the weight of her round, firm mammaries reinforced the reality of that perfectly appealing form. Her let her nipples slip between his splayed fingers, and then pinched them softly as he watched her muzzle part with a soft, wistful ‘ohh’ that only made him pulse between her thighs as she pushed herself down harder against him so intimately.

“Lyat not sure which of us is being done more favor.” The hyena murmured softly, his little tail drumming between his thighs in the dusty pathway. He let his head rest on the pillow as he looked back up at those luscious breasts, smished hotly in his hands, pushed together to show her proud cleavage as he kneaded and massaged her chest. The lady wolf willfully pushed herself heavier into his hands and stirred her hips as she uttered a breathless and lustful answer,

“You are unsure... because you don’t know what it feels like... to draw your kind of essence, Lyat.” Her words were very genuine and her expression tense and anxious,

desperate and excited. She did not just want what Lyat was about to give her, she needed it. Perhaps enough to risk violence to put him on his back and make sure he didn't slip away? He could not be sure, but he had long since stopped regretting that knock on the head. He nodded to the priestess' heated words, and rolled his hips back up against hers enough to lift her light but motherly padded frame up off the ground a little, her knees leaving the walkway a little as he bared upward into her letting her smear her petals open on the ridge of his fat, aching cock. He was already fully aroused, and more than ready to give what Luna wanted to take. The lovely lady lupine then slipped back, freeing his hot masculinity to the cooling late afternoon air. She slipped a hand down, cradling his thick length, as she leaned down. Lyat's eyes widened, the priestess about to do something very submissive to someone who suddenly felt very undeserving.

"Oh Luna..." his words were hardly able to break his lips before her sucked in a hot gasp for breath. Her mouth cupped his thick, twitching cock-tip, and her tongue spread around the tip like a cloak, concealing, coating, stroking around in a slow, rolling motion as her hand slipped down the base of his length, rubbing in a slow, methodical motion. Lyat's head dropped back as pleasure he had absolutely not been ready for tore through him, paralyzing him. Luna was pushing essence through her tongue, she had to be. Rios had done this once or twice to him through her fingertips, but she could not do it with her tongue. It sent shockwaves up his spine as her tongue seemed to slap the tip of his pulsing member with each stroke, her hand just working slowly, undulating and milking at him lower. Another hand slipped to his heavy sack, cupping and encouraging as she worked him up.

Lyat propped himself up to watch her, wanting to see if he could tell what she was doing, maybe something he could let his lover know when he returned home. If he brought her news, tales of the capabilities of the Letai priestesses, the genuine article, she would be most pleased with him. And he would not consider it suffering if she were to learn something like this. His legs tightened and relaxed heatedly. He could not help it. She was drawing the very desire to flood her muzzle to the surface of his mind and he could not get it out. As he watched, her hand pushed down to his groin, and her head sank down, her tongue slipping around his length like a tube, not able to close more than half way around his thick cock. She sank her head down, her muzzle taking unbelievably every inch of his cock, her throat widening and not forcefully contracting at all to the intrusion as she took him until her nose pushed into the fluff of his groin. His eyes widened. He had never seen anyone do that before. He didn't think one could do that. She drew back, exhaling as she did so, and swallowing down his salty pre spread thickly at the back of her throat and tongue. She drew her head back slowly, suckling his length until just the tip remained in her capable muzzle, before freeing her dark, supple lips with a little sweet pop.

"Now then, sweet spotty boy..." the matronly wolf murmured sensually as she rose up on her knees again. "I think we have an understanding here..." her words were a near whisper. His thighs parted a little as she got herself into position. The hyena gazed up at Luna wide-eyed as she nestled the tip of his thick, throbbing erection at her

puffy, now slickly aroused and puffy folds. He whined in spite of his desperate attempt to control his reaction. If that understanding was that she would make the hyena cum embarrassingly easily if she wished, then yes, there was definitely an understanding. This was as intense as an outright attack, even more so than the blow to his head before. He felt powerless to Luna, just as much as with Rios.

The hyena groaned deeply as Luna pushed herself wetly down his spire, the Asuna male throbbing hard inside her the moment her felt her slick inner walls glide down to his base with ease and determination. She pushed her motherly hips to his hotly, rolling them back and forth slowly. This motion only caused Lyat's toes to spread a bit, and he leans back, trembling at the sensations that tore through him. At least she had relented on the streaming sensation of blinding pleasure her tongue had allowed. She was just using her body now, but that wasn't anything to ignore.

"You feeling so tight... hot..." Lyat marveled, his muscles flexing tightly as he pushed his hips upward to meet her rolling stroke. She gripped him almost virginally tight inside, her muscles trained to hold him, to milk the essence from him, one way or the other. He gritted his teeth. He was losing it.

"You know why Rios took Alps." Luna whispered hotly, huffing.

"Whuh?" huffed the hyena. "...To produce heir." The hyena barked out in a puff, his hips pushing hard back to hers. His hands pushed back to her perfect, heavy, round mammarys. He delighted in rolling their impressive weight in his eager hands, as his sack tightened up longingly. He was so close to just spilling his seed, and he had no reason to resist it, knowing that it was not her pleasure specifically the priestess was after. She wanted his essence, which would pulse from him with each rush of pleasure that rippled through him when it finally happened. Luna spoke again, puffing out a happy breath each time her hips collided with his, now bouncing slowly but evenly over his lap.

"So you know... Asuna are compatible to Letai. That's how the bloodline of your Empress began, yes?" the priestess panted. Lyat dizzily nodded. Yes, he knew that, he understood. His eyes then shot open, the hyena freezing, and planting his feet on the dusty rooftop path.

"Wait, what?" he barked, looking up in sudden grave seriousness. Luna continued to stroke him in a heavenly fashion deep in her suckling, cock-worshipping honeypot. She had a loving smile spread upon her lips. Lyat's mind burned brighter, beyond his pleasure a moment, the hyena tightening up to control himself. Why would she bring that up? Did she have intentions on more than his essence.

"Would you be sure that a Letai priestess was not in her mother's moon, Lyat?" Luna spoke almost mirthfully, rolling her hips with longer, more pronounced strokes, slipping the throbbing hyena cock almost fully from her pouting folds, only to push him back in with that hard, lustful counterstroke. Lyat put his hands up to Luna's hips, trying

to hold her still. If she kept that up, he'd cum, no matter what she was saying.

"Luna, ahah... Is priestess... In mother's moon? Is she?" Lyat winced as her hands were suddenly tugged away from her hips, her thighs pumping harder. He looked up, expecting to see the treacherous hands of another priestess holding his wrists tightly, but was shocked into a dread realization of just how powerless he was by what he saw. His hands were held away from the priestess not by another person, but by coiled vines that had busts thick and strong from the ground in the planter, roots of some kind. He pulled on them, flexing tightly, and found himself unable to easily budge, the bushes shuffling a little, quaking from the force of his struggle.

"The Letai are nearly gone... just a few of us remain, freed from the crystal..." the priestess spoke wistfully, dreamily, seeming in deeper pleasure than the physical stroking of that throbbing organ inside her might allow in her even, heated pace. "We must waste no time in renewing our numbers Lyat. You of all people know the importance. You of all people know how the personal fears and misgivings of another are unimportant in the light of the survival of an entire race." The Asuna male winced in agonizing pleasure, writhing under the Priestess as he fought against the bonds of his shrub captor. How could these roots possibly hold a full-grown, fully trained Asuna warrior? He closed his eyes, trembling, feeling that welling heat in the pit of his belly. He could not hold it much longer. He understood what Luna was doing, though. It finally occurred to him, and to him, not a moment too soon. She wanted him to understand that Alps' hesitation to help the Asuna was a real fear, and he should not ignore it, or think him weak, even if the matter was too important for Alps to have a choice in the eyes of the Asuna.

"Lyat is understanding Priestess Luna. Alps is not having choice, and is scary to Alps, yes? Lyat knows this already, is not being necessary to... too... Ahha.. Luna, Lyat is pleading... Is apologizing to Alps for not giving choice... He is not being wrong to be unhappy before... Luna... Lyat is sorry for putting wolf in so complicated problem!" Luna huffed hotly, looking down at the pitching, writhing, moaning hyena with a joyful expression. Her hips slap-slap-slapped hotly at his own, her thick tail bouncing and bobbing behind her as she rode his lap heavily.

"Ooooooh, but I want you to cum Lyat... I want it so much... I burn all over... do you honestly think I can stop when I feel you inside me, so ready to quench that burning inside me?" he raspy voice whispered, those long, suckling strokes strumming up and down Lyat's pulsing cock. Her breasts, free of his hands now, bounced before him, letting him see their perfect round weight thump against her chest as she put her hands on his tummy, holding steady as she jerked her hips harder and faster.

"I'm gonna cum!" cried the hyena, flexing. She was kidding, right? She wasn't doing this! She was not in her mother's moon, that would leave so much conflict in his mind, and he understood all too keenly what Alps really worried about. Responsibility for more than just himself. His body tightened. It was too late. Fight it though he may, he could not stop it.

Luna popped him from her soaking wet slit, and gripped him in both her hands, sliding back between his thighs as she knelt over him, taking his cock back in her mouth again in one engulfing gulp, her tongue pushed out and over his sack. His pulsing, throbbing tip was quite a bit down her contracting, swallowing throat, kneading him phenomenally, and her tongue spread wide and hot over his tightening balls, ready to blow their load that very second. What came next was something Lyat could only later describe as sexually devastating. She pushed that intense essence right through her tongue and into his aching balls right as he finally exploded. Lyat screamed like a girl, back arched, hands clenched in tight fists, the bushes shaking violently as he pulled tightly on his restraints.

The hyena had been brought to a few rough climaxes in the company of a lover before, but this climax was as painful as a savage punishment for his insolence with the one who saved the priestess from a fate worse than death. And yet, it was pleasure he could not possibly deny. She began to pump her hand and muzzle over him rapidly, through the middle and into the end of his climax, forcing the hyena to squirt his load in a long, rolling release. She swallowed loudly, claiming that potent boiling load of his seed for her own, having only been a half second away from having it spill inside her in a more classic intimacy. He could not tell if she was gathering his essence or not, but it honestly did not matter as he cried out again and again in those almost painful waves of his personal beautiful torture at the hands of someone who probably knew more about pleasure than his entire race could ever imagine.

His body finally relaxed a bit, and he sagged, the roots still holding up his hands, but his body going limp as he just rested, mind spinning, dizzy, delirious, rocked to the point of nearly feeling ill from it, breathless and feeling abused and ravaged. That was not what he was used to when hearing about what the Letai healers were known for. They were more like what he saw before from Luna... gentle, sweet, tender... apparently a woman crossed was the same no matter what race. She was beautiful but terrifying. Those roots finally unwound from his wrists, which were likely bruised, and at least sore from the strain. Bands of mud were still around his wrists as proof of the priestess' dominance over him. The coiling vines, done with their purpose in answering to their mistress, slipped quietly, harmlessly back into the rooftop planter.

"You have... spectacular control... for an Asuna, Lyat." Luna panted happily, smearing some of his release off of her muzzle and onto his tummy. She seemed perfectly happy to do whatever she felt like to him. Lyat nodded dizzily. "I am glad we have a complete understanding, please share Alps' feelings on the matter with your Empress." Luna stated, moving to the side. Lyat sat up a little and looked back to the beautiful priestess.

"Is you... being in need of your pleasure... priestess?" the hyena panted. Luna smiled at him, licking her lips softly. She panted out, breathlessly,

"Oh I will get mine, don't you worry, but for now... I got what I wanted. If I get lost

in my pleasure right now... aheh... I shall lose control, and commit you to more than you are willing." Luna's tone was dizzy and heated as well, pleasure showing in her eyes. Lyat widened his eyes.

"Wait, you is really in mother's moon?" the strong warrior's tone was suddenly rife with panic. She would not have taken that kind of chance!

"A Letai Priestess is known for her relationship with her lovers, her relationship with her family, and her relationship with the truth. I would not tease you about something like that, Lyat." Her words were a little more measured as the healthy, capable woman regained her breath a bit.

"What if Lyat is not controlling well? What if he warns nothing and you feel him spilling... what is priestess doing with inexperienced Asuna if Lyat is that?" he put his hands by his sides, looking dumbfounded at the priestess. That was a very odd thing to take a risk with to make a point, the hyena felt.

"If you had popped inside me before I could slip you free... or maybe if I had lost to my needs and was suddenly very selfish with you?" the priestess asked, slipping her muzzle by his ear, embracing the strong Asuna.

"Yes! What if?" Lyat repeated in exasperation.

"Asuna children are adorable, Lyat." Luna stated, and then, rather effortlessly, she hopped up and slipped her robed back up over her shoulders, and tied it around her middle, looking terribly unkempt, but decent. She held a hand up, and the shrubs parted. "Don't you foolishly believe that I didn't want it spotty boy. And don't think I have truly decided not to take it." The priestess said this last part with a somewhat darker tone, casting a playful, admiring glance back at the warrior. She laughed softly, melodically as she padded away, leaving Lyat to simmer in his thoughts and the glaze of her honey over his soaking lap.

"She is surely being joke-telling." The hyena rumbled to himself softly after she had gone, pulling his trousers on, but not bothering with his shirt at that moment. It was obviously jumbled and not presentable enough to wear from his laying on it.

"A curious person, Luna..." came a soft, gentle voice from above Lyat. He jumped up, turning. Standing on a post that was used to help originally direct the growth of the shrub when it was young was that strange black fox. She was perfectly balanced, but standing almost casually on the ball of one foot, the other resting quietly against the back of the ankle of the first as her hands rested clasped behind her back. She seemed confident beyond anything someone her size should have been around an Asuna, he thought.

"You! You is startling Asunas. Wait... You is not seeing that." He stated with insistence, the intent being that she knew it was private and not to be spread around.



Luna was not someone he wanted to get angry at him. Not after that display of not only her power, but her ability to get into his head.

"Your saying so does not make me see it any less now than I did for the last half hour. Odd that she would strike you and then heal you, don't you think?" the fox asked. Lyat recoiled a bit, and then rubbed his head. Oh yeah. Luna knocked him out. He wasn't mistaken. Why had he started to think he was?

"You is seeing that then..." he stated. "She is attacked Asuna. Very bold." Lyat noted this as if in realization again of that transgression.

"Asuna are vengeful and defensive. They are very powerful, capable warriors." Ellis stated, her tail coiling back and forth in casual thought. Lyat nodded at this proudly. Lhaps knew what the Asuna were at least. This was another good thing that he would be able to report to his Empress. "That was, however, a most interesting reprisal. Luna will think twice before striking an Asuna again, I am sure." Lyat narrowed his eyes. The fox was insulting him.

"Lyat is wanting that. Is repaying Priestess for saving Lyat before. You is not there to see that." He called this out to Ellis firmly.

"I was there. She saved you twice, once unnecessarily." The lady fox hopped off her perch, and stepped over to Lyat. He considered that she might attack him as close as she was, but then again, he might attack her. He stood motionless. She was so odd in her intensity.

"So you is knowing this. Why is Luna hitting Lyat then?" he asked.

"To state one's knowledge is to admit ones limits." Ellis said softly. "But to ask is to show ones wisdom, so I will answer this, lest you hold against Luna that which is entirely beyond her control or fault." Lyat widened his eyes. The fox spoke wisdom, this was worth knowing. He drew back consideration of attack, as what might be said could well be valuable to him in understanding the complexity of things going on around him. He might be in the castle a while, and didn't want to overstay his welcome due of ignorance.

"Yes, please. Telling Lyat what is Luna thinking to attack an Asuna in such a way?" He leaned against the balcony again. Ellis spoke.

"Luna is a powerful healer from a time of intense war. She was known for healing her way through half a devastated town in days, tirelessly giving of herself, and taking of others, not unlike she showed you, but this was traumatic to her. To pleasure someone gives pleasure, and this you can understand. It's not uncommon for Letai to become addicted to merely bringing happiness. They often do. Luna, however, found her pleasure, her addiction, somewhere else. She found her addiction not in pleasure, but in the easing, the removal of suffering. It's an even more potent allure for the

priestess, and I could see it in her eyes when she spoke with you. She longed to ease your suffering when she asked if you had been hurt." Lyat listened to the vixen as she continued to explain. He spoke up softly,

"Lyat was being fine though. Lyat was not being hurt. She is finding someone in maybe city below. She is helping others, surely." The Asuna tried to understand. Ellis resumed her interrupted explanation.

"No. She could not. The presence of the priestesses is still a carefully kept secret here in the castle. Luna cannot leave, and you will find it very rare that someone *here* is injured and needs healing. It was only a matter of time before the priestess could no longer wait. Just your good fortune, Asuna." The black-furred vixen chuckled at Lyat as she moved toward the balcony again. "Thank you for delivering Alps back to his home. He will not be in the crystal long. He's getting stronger. You should go back inside before they lock you on the roof." Her words were very ominous. Lyat looked at the door behind him past the hedgerows, and saw it was still open, so he was not too late. He looked back to Ellis to thank her.

But she was gone.

"Lyat maybe doesn't tell Rios about that part." Lyat said, and then moved hurriedly back to the relative sanity of the inside of castle Diera. He'd stay off the roof, he decided.

## Sirius, Book III

### *The Essence*

*Comments or Questions?*

Contact Alps: [sarsis@gmail.com](mailto:sarsis@gmail.com)

Or just drop a note at: <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/sarsis/>

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## Chapter 16

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Darkness had closed in around the pair again. Alps held Nidaja's hand tightly in his own to make sure she did not slip away. He expected that this time, as the world changed around him to let him travel within the crystal world, he would still be able to see Nidaja and himself, as he had with Luna. The slave was happy to see that his expectations were met, at least in part. It was not nearly as bright as it had been with Luna. Then again, Luna was a High Priestess. When Alps drew upon her energy, he likely got a lot more than Nidaja was able to give, and Luna had been without happiness for so long that the potency of her joy in finding anyone in that eternal solitude likely dramatically magnified what she felt.

Still, Alps was able to see, as if in twilight, an unseen half-moon casting eerie bluish light over them. Nidaja, however, looked a little stunned by the near darkness. She had not endured this whole experience before, the way Alps had, so she did not know what to expect.

"It's pretty dark in here. What are we standing on?" the general finally asked. Alps shook his head.

"It is probably better not to think about it." He spoke softly, his voice utterly without any kind of reverberation. There was nothing for it to bounce off of. He looked around in the darkness, trying, peering, and hoping to find some kind of light there as he had before. To escape in any kind of reasonable time, he would most certainly need more than just Nidaja. He could still do it, he thought to himself, it would just take what equated to a year or more in the real world. He was not willing to make Nita wait that long. They were supposed to be getting married soon, after all. He would not deny her this.

"Are we looking for a way out now?" Nidaja held Alps' hand tighter as he started walking in a random direction. He felt that if he moved far enough he would just come to one of those lights. He seemed to be inexplicably drawn to them, and there really was no sense of left or right, back and forth, or even up and down here. Perhaps every direction merely led to where Alps wanted to go. To the next person that was in the crystal them. Alps replied softly,

"We are trying to find someone else trapped in this crystal. The more energy we can gather at one time, the faster we can get out. On our own, we can still get out... I just don't want to stay in here that long. We have a very worried family to get back to." Alps blushed a little at his own words. It was the first time that he had referred to Nita or Nidaja as family, but as she squeezed his hand, he could tell that she liked him saying it.

The pair walked along for some time together. They spoke a bit on matters of duties once they returned, and things concerning Rios and the Asuna that needed to be handled. Alps expressed some worry that Nita might have ordered poor Lyat and Reika jailed for getting him put into a Shadowfall crystal, since it was their kidnapping of him that eventually led to that. They were so engrossed in conversation that Alps almost missed a little “star” that glimmered high above them.

“There... Is that it? You said it looked like a little light...” Nidaja seemed skeptical as she noticed what Alps was looking at. The white lupine nodded at her as he peered up at it. “How are we supposed to get to a star, Alps? That’s up in the sky. It’s probably very far away.” The general seemed to lament their luck with this new development. Alps stopped walking, and focused on it. When he was drifting, he had control of every direction, and even if it felt that they were walking, he was still in this place, and still felt that odd sense of control.

“Then I guess we will have to put it out in front of us.” His words were confident as he felt the tangible fluctuation of the world around him under his will. It was like feeling the ground under his feet, telling him that he could stand there. He rose to his feet in this place where will was direction, willing his intended heading to level the little point of light which shifted and moved down ahead of them. Nidaja gripped Alps’ hand, as to her it likely felt that the world were just suddenly lurching under her. When the light was dead ahead, Alps started to walk, but he started to will himself and Nidaja forward as well, so the point of light started getting larger immediately, seeming a lot closer than it had before just because of the speed at which they were now moving.

“Well, this is better.” The general nodded a bit as she walked with Alps. They were not really walking, after all. There was no ground, it just felt more comfortable while moving to move one’s legs as the motion felt more natural. Alps pulled his lover along toward the light, and they resumed their conversation, discussing what the slave had learned about the essence. Even though Nidaja had trained in the use of it to strengthen her in a fight, she was not aware of a few of the techniques that Alps spoke of, even the ones that he had shown her, caressing the general with his own essence the way he had before. Alps told her that if possible, he could teach it to her, and anything else he learned if it were something she was able to do.

Before much time had passed, amid their light-hearted and not-so-serious conversations, they came to just outside the light. They were close enough that they could reach out and touch it when Alps stopped.

“What do we do now?” Nidaja asked cautiously. The white lupine looked back at her and smiled.

“We free someone else from a torment and loneliness they thought would last forever.” He wagged his tail frantically as he stated this. He had been looking forward to this moment since he got into the crystal, he had to admit. He had not realized he would be able to do it when he got Luna and the others out before, but here, now, he knew he was the hero this person had given up hope of ever meeting. That was a rather serious ego boost and gave him strength and courage. In this place, he could push back the darkness in a way no one else could.

“What will it be like in the light?” Nidaja inquired with further hesitation. “Mine was a nightmare.” Alps explained what was to come as best he could, unsure himself what to expect.

“This one will likely be as well, but a nightmare for the individual, not for us. We might not even understand what we are supposed to be seeing that’s upsetting them so. Ceriss and Luna both knew that they were in the Shadowfall. This one might too. We will see. Just understand that what you see in there is not real.” Alps held Nidaja’s hand tighter. The slave then added in a half-whisper, “Your own thoughts as you go in might affect the place also, so try to just think of pleasant things.” Nidaja nodded to this and watched as Alps reached up, and touched the glowing light.

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Lunaris landed hard on his back, a puff of grit and dust erupting from under him as he skidded a bit. He was back on his feet in a heartbeat, just in time to meet with a clashing of wood against hard toned flesh, the strong but short sticks in both his hands forming a cross in front of him to stop a powerful swing from deceptively small arms. He blocked wrists which ended in splayed hands and blunt but strong claws intent on raking his hide. He spun into the attack, bringing himself naturally behind the forward advancing foe, and then brought a stick down to catch the top of a seemingly unprepared head. The opponent seemed to know his attack, putting a strong hand over her head in an instant, the stick caught and quickly snatched right out of his less-deceptively strong grip.

Reika spun around, facing Lunaris with a mirthful grin as she had captured her filched weapon back from him. This fight had been going on for several minutes, and was strangely evenly matched despite the size difference between them. Lunaris towered over the diminutive Asuna girl, but he did not come even close to matching her in ferocity. The wooded area they selected for their “play-time” as Reika called it was remote and well covered. Lunaris felt that if they practiced and sparred in the open where they could be seen by the general public it might cause a panic. Almost no one knew the Asuna were even in the city, and it was unlikely that they would be allowed to know why. This would make even the royal family’s actions seem suspicious.

Reika wore her dark leather trousers, the scent of travel heavy upon them, but not pungent or unpleasant. At least, it wasn’t yet. Her shirt was a simple white cotton blouse, bound at the sleeves half way up the arms to give her more freedom of motion. It looked more masculine than ladylike, and her smallish chest made it difficult at first glance, especially with her ferocity in a fight, to tell she was not a boy. By how Lunaris was fighting back, it seemed that the fact was being utterly ignored. He did not have to shower respect upon girl hyenas, after all. Lunaris wore similar dark trousers of a more heavy cotton material, and a bit baggier, which hid the motion of his legs. His shirt was a more eastern design as well, flared at the sleeves and tied at the waist, made of some kind of light, silky material, but strong and dark. The overlap of

the shoulders and the dag of the sleeves made it likewise hard to quickly just the motion of his hands. He wore sandals on his feet while Reika was adorned in no foot wear. In this forest they held their “meeting” to test their strength away from the prying eyes of those who didn’t know.

The two people from the castle gate who *did* know about them were present. Shelsie and Kenarra, the two grey-furred lady guards who had met the Asuna at the castle gate watched the fight with intense interest. Neither had ever seen anything so primal and severe in a fight. They obviously cheered for their captain, but had become openly friendly with the young lady Asuna. They liked her quirks and her harsh mannerisms and they had felt special to get to know an actual Asuna without bleeding profusely for the honor. They stood to cheer, dressed in their uniform shirts and leather-plated skirts to their mid-thigh, as well as tall boots. The shirts were black with red trim ornately at the collar and end of the sleeves, with frog buttons of red velvet as well. They had come out looking their best to cheer their captain on.

There were no other people to interfere or interject, so the event had turned sportingly raucous. One would have thought the pair had money on the fight for how involved they were, shouting from the edge of the tree-line in the clearing, staying out of the way, as Reika had a tendency to throw debris and kick dirt at her opponent to distract him. Lunaris finally gave a spinning attack with his stick that, while Reika was able to meet it with her own, she was not able to merely deflect, which made her have to move back, retreating a little. The momentum allowed her opponent to sweep in closer, and he hooked a leg behind her own, and brought his stick, with both hands, to her chest, sending Reika hard to the ground. Lunaris had to admit to himself that this was a lot harder than he’d ever fought a female before. He was simply not willing to risk injuring those who had the chance to fight in the past. Reika, however, he could risk. She knew who he was and what the fight risked. Even so, he was extremely impressed with her resilience.

He jumped down on top of the lady Asuna, and tried to pin her. She brought a knee up where it should have connected with his crotch, but Lunaris expected this rather predictable defense, catching her foot neatly between his powerful thighs. The wolf grabbed Reika’s wrists as she tried to bring her stick back up to strike him, and slammed her back to the loamy forest floor again. The sound of her body’s impact on the ground was loud enough for the cheering lupine females at the clearing’s edge to clearly hear which only made them cheer louder for their captain, though groaning with sympathy for the fallen Asuna.

“Now then... The fight is over if you can’t move.” Lunaris stated calmly, though breathlessly at the trapped hyena. Struggle though she might, Lunaris was stronger and a lot heavier, and was able to keep her right where she was. Reika smiled up at the wolf.

“Is thinking so, wolf Captain?” she asked. “You is not getting to move either. If you is letting go of Reika’s hand, she is hurting you. If you is trying to get up...” she panted a bit, “... you is having to let go of Reika’s leg. And Asuna is used to living without food. You is holding her here for days, yes? You have time for that?” Lunaris folded back his ears. He knew this of course, but he did not expect someone would call him out on that in a practice. She was caught. Sure, she technically lost the fight, but it seemed that the Asuna were more tenacious than that. One of the lady spectators chimed in,

“He can hold you until help arrives.” Lunar is looked up and nodded.

“This is true, but it might not come for a while, so the hyena is right. She could outlast me. The fight might not be over, but for the sake of not wasting the next three days finding out, I will release her.” He let go of her free hand, and then the other, sitting back to dust off his knees. The Asuna was not done, however. She folded up onto her haunches and launched herself at the lupine captain, gleaming a cry from the watchers. Lunar is grunted loudly at the impact of her strong body, and skidded back quite a few feet on the leafy floor of the forest clearing, before coming to a stop with a smaller, but very strong and ferocious hyena on top of him.

“Got you!” the girl Asuna barked triumphantly.

“The fight was over, Reika.” Lunar is spoke mildly, pretty certain that the girl, being a bit on the eccentric side, had simply not understood.

“Reika knows.” Her response was matter-of-fact and confident.

“Then why tackle him?” one of the lady lupines asked, walking over to help if needed. They would do nothing unless asked. They knew the rules. Lunar is waved to them dismissively.

“He is pinning Reika. Reika wanted to get to pin him too. Is fair, yes?” she asked, wagging her fluffy short hyena tail. She flexed her muscles a bit, holding him down by the shoulders, hips settling on Lunar is’ middle.

“Fair, I suppose. I am not sure why you would want to though.” Lunar is offered casually from beneath the girl. He did not want to seem distressed in front of the guards. Reika looked up, as if into her own mind, trying to think of why.

“Wolfs is strange. Reika is not getting to be close to them like this in not bad ways. Brother is liking Nidaja the wolf general.” She noted this openly, as if such things were just common knowledge. “Nidaja is strong wolf general. She is making Lyat happy in her time with him. Reika is not knowing why brother is happy. Is just wolf, yes? Brother is happier with Empress, but Nidaja is making him happy too, and she is not Asuna Empress. Wolfs is special and Rios is not knowing?” she asked, remaining on the guard captain. “Reika is liking pinning Lunar is though, so maybe Asuna is supposed to like that. Is feeling nice to know is doing this and not hurting. Wolfs is feeling strong even on the ground. Reika likes.”

“I have no idea what the hell she’s talking about.” One of the girls spoke softly, rubbing the back of her head, dumbfounded. Lunar is interjected softly to try to clear the matter up, and hopefully rid himself of his lap-hyena.

“Nidaja spent time with your brother? That does not surprise me. They traveled together, and Nidaja has a very good nature to her. I am sure they became friends.” The lady Asuna looked at Lunar is blankly. She pondered this and then murmured softly,

“You is being Reika’s friend then, the same way? Reika can have friends of wolfs like her brother?” she asked. Lunar is seemed a bit puzzled at that and rested on his back as he looked up at the cute, but over-the-top female warrior. She spoke simply, but he suspected she was actually more mature than the language barrier let on. She had to understand that friendship was not impossible between different peoples, and didn’t seem to be programmed or just hate every wolf she met. He decided to offer his friendship to Reika so that she’d understand that the Amanians were not that different from her and her brother.

“I think that would be a delightful arrangement, Reika. I am not hard to get along with, and I think that if Nidaja is able to call you and Lyat her friends, you certainly deserve no less from me.” His tail wagged heavily between his thighs behind the Asuna. She smiled brightly.

“Oh is very good, yes?” she barked, “Reika is being just as good a friend as Nidaja is being to Lyat. You see. Is wanting to learn about wolfs the way Lyat is.” She then rather abruptly leaned down, hands holding Lunar is’ shoulders, and sealed her muzzle to his own in a breathless, excited kiss. Lunar is’ mind frayed at the moment of contact with her lips, too confused and bewildered to even react. The level of shock was no less on the lady guards, who both made a different sound, but their sounds conveyed almost panicked shock. The lady hyena leaned back up, grinning at the stunned Lunar is.

“Is good. Lyat is being right. Wolfs is good for this. Brother is telling Reika, but sister is not listening. Brother is right. Wolfs is nice.” She nodded kind of stupidly, seeming quite pleased with herself. Lunar is took a moment to compose his thoughts. He knew that insulting Reika in the position he was in would be a terrible idea, and truthfully he didn’t hate the kiss. The girl was quite attractive and well-meaning, if perhaps somewhat misguided and odd.

“Did Lyat and Nidaja kiss, Reika?” Lunar is asked calmly. He wanted to clear up whether or not Reika had just misunderstood what friends did together, especially in the company of others. Nidaja liked Alps, but to think she’d kiss the hyena, especially in front of his sister, was a little far-fetched. There had to be some misunderstanding. Shelsie and Kenarra stood on either side, swaying in shock.

“Yes. Nidaja and Lyat is friends. They is doing that.” She said, nodding, leaning back down and touching her nose to the prone wolf’s jaw line, slipping her tongue out and teasing his fur with it. Lunar is tensed up. If he handled this wrong, it could be disastrous. Pushing her away would insult her and make her feel the need to fight to maintain her status. Accepting her advance in front of the two guards would alter their perception of his strength, and might give the misunderstanding Reika reason to think she could just push herself onto anyone she wanted like that. The lupine captain knew that males held less power in Asuna lands than they did in his own, so this was likely not that odd to the Asuna, but it was unspeakable to those watching her here.

“They are friends, yes, you said this, but do you know that they kissed? Are they the *kind* of friends that do that? Did Lyat say they were?” he asked. Reika looked at the resting wolf beneath her. His breathing had returned to normal, so he was relaxed a bit more there. She released his shoulders and just rested her hands on his chest. The hyena girl openly explained,



“Empress is having Alps, is why she is taking him. She is doing more than kissing, Reika was there, she knows! Reika helped, so she is knowing all about boy wolfs and girl Asuna. Nidaja came back to take Alps, and is finding that my brother is belonging to Rios, and she is telling Empress that she is doing same to her hyena as Rios is to Alps. They is being together more than one time when travelling. Nidaja is saying it herself, but brother is told Reika about it too. Lyat tells Reika all about it, and is said is same thing as with empress, but with wolf general. Reika asked if is better or worse, and brother is saying is neither. It is being just different. Do you think is different? Reika has kissed Asunas before, and is different, just like brother said, but not bad different.” Lunar is listened to her ramble on and on, sitting on his tummy, seeming not to have any reason or interest in moving. His eyes widened, and stayed wide for a bit at the admission that Alps had been with the empress. That was two leaders he knew for a fact that the young slave had been with. It was a little bizarre. That white-furred lupine was only a slave.

Nidaja having the Asuna male was a shock too, but not as much so. The general had exotic tastes, and if she had gotten over her hatred of the Asuna enough to risk going into a Shadowfall to help them, it was not unreasonable that she had sampled a strong and attractive Asuna for herself, especially on a dangerous journey over such distance. The black-furred male finally spoke again.

“It was different, yes. Your tongue is wider and stronger than a lupine tongue.” Lunar is tried to explain in a way that was not insulting. Stronger was never insulting to an Asuna, he knew. “Also, if you are any example, Asuna girls are perhaps more aggressive, and take what they are after more readily, whether a wolf might be ready or not. It certainly surprised me.” He chuckled a bit, nodding to her. That was it. He would seem appreciative of her strength and dominance, and help her understand how the kiss was different. Reika seemed suddenly conflicted and untrusting of his words, looking around in what seemed to be a bit of embarrassment.

“You is hating it? Reika is made you mad?” she asked. Lunar is gritted his teeth. Here was a place where a misstep would cause serious problems. Reika might have been a powerful warrior and a seasoned traveller, but she was still a woman. Earning her scorn here would be bad for everyone.

“No, I liked it, I was just surprised.” He gave a welcoming smile, trying to allay that kind of possible thinking.

“Reika is learning more then. Is doing like Empress and Alps. Is learning about that.” There was a twittering laugh from the two guards. This was adorable. Not only was the strong, vicious Asuna sweet on their captain, he seemed to actually be afraid of the situation, and probably deeply embarrassed. He sighed softly. This would get talked about in private a lot between the two of them, he bet. He’d probably have to have them transferred if this went much further.

“Perhaps, but this is not the place or the time. There are others present, and such things

should be kept in private.” Lunar is offered this, thinking that he could remain too busy to give her a chance at him again, and be able to dodge the awkwardness of it. He didn’t mind the thought, so much, but he didn’t want the guards to see such a thing, and was not sure of the longer term repercussions if such a thing were found out. He was also not terribly interested in relationships or other sticky things of that nature. His duties were too important to him, and he didn’t want this rather crazy girl to get emotionally attached to him. Besides being extra responsibility to him, it could very well be dangerous for them both. He had to keep his head about him here.

“Oh. Others is saying no then?” Reika asked, looking up at the girls and flattening her ears in a threatening glare. Lunar is widened his eyes. He was going to get his fellow guards killed.

“Oh no...” Shelsie said, handover her heart with casual grace.

“We don’t give him orders, he gives us orders. We certainly can’t stop you.” Kenarra stated, wagging.

“Please, resume.” Shelsie added.

Lunar is looked up at the pair with a sudden sinking sense of dread. He was going to kill them himself. This was not an easy situation to be in, and he did not believe they really understood the complexity of it.

“Is good then, yes? Girl wolfs is not minding, and Reika is not having private places here better than deep, quiet woods. Is just like Reika’s first time. Quiet and trees and friends is here to cheer Reika on!” she noted. Lunar is squirmed a bit and rumbled,

“Reika, I don’t think you understand what you are doing. You don’t need this kind of distraction while you are on a mission. This is important for your Empress, remember? I will only cause you to lose focus if you spend time with me like this.” Lunar is began to breathe a little faster. The girl would not really take him right there and right then, would she? The lady hyena crossed her arms in front of her chest, as if to hug herself, and then just drew her shirt off, wagging her short little tail. With Reika’s shirt cast to the side, the two lady wolves watching were utterly speechless. They were suddenly aware of the trouble they just got their captain into. The hyena was serious about it. Lunar is’ pupils traveled up Reika’s body. It was hard with muscle, her breasts small but round and plump and firm. She had a very youthful and athletic physique. It was appealing to Lunar is, but this girl was dangerous, this was a terrible idea.

“Reika takes a break. Hyenas not work always. We is relaxing when time allows, and castle is safe for Asuna right now. Forest around it too. Nidaja is saying so. And she is saying Lunar is helping any way we is needing so long as we is followed the rules, yes? This is helping Asunas, and Asunas is following the rules.” The lovely Asuna brought her hands to cup her breasts, slipping back a little over the guard captain’s tummy, to his thighs to reveal his waist. “Wolfs need to take breaks too. Having fun is good for wolves. Nidaja takes breaks, and is a great wolf.” Lunar is inwardly groaned at his predicament. To Reika, this was perfectly

socially acceptable. Lunar is had trouble thinking that even in her homeland a normal encounter between lovers, or lovers to be, would go like this.

“He’s perhaps a little shy, Reika.” Kenarra stated softly, seeming to try to do some damage control. Lunar is looked up. Wrong approach, that made Lunar is seem weaker, and the hyena would certainly not stop if she didn’t respect his strength.

“No, I don’t mind it, I just don’t want her doing something she will later not like having done.” Lunar is swallowed loudly as hands came to the ties of his loose-legged trousers. She began working the laces.

“Reika not regrets. Silly to regret. You do, and decide to do again or do not. Regret is stupid. Can’t undo what is done.” She pulled the “v” of his trousers open, making the strong guard captain gasp.

“Oh dear.” Shelsie whispered, her superior officer revealed to her and her colleague just like that. Lunar is gasped loudly as two strong hands slipped over his masculinity, caressing fondly. He flattened his ears. Okay, so he probably was not going to get out of this gracefully. This is not how he wanted to spend his afternoon, but the girl seemed to really need some kind of confirmation in all this. Lunar is wished he could figure out what exactly she was after. He might not need to get ravaged by a hyena in front of his subordinates to provide it.

The wolf on his back slipped his hands up over Reika’s chest, and her hands immediately came to his, a little surprised. She seemed to think he might push her away, but instead, he gave those handfuls of mammary flesh a soft and rolling squeeze. There was a collective gasp between the other two guards as the hyena released a soft, tense moan, and leaned in for another kiss. Lunar is relented, letting her really have it. Stopping her now, in front of respected peers, guards she had befriended, would only shame her and make her stay far more awkward. He would not let her memory of the Amanian city be a negative one if he could. She would bring stories back of how kind and open the Amanian people were, and how much fun she had in their midst.

Perhaps it would soften the tension between their cultures. Lunar is was unaware of the work already being done in this area. Not knowing, he felt that he could explain to the witnessing guards that he did this for that very reason, but as her hands returned to his thickening dark shaft, swelling in her curious, awkward hands, he wondered if he was just making excuses. Something about how strong and vicious and wild she was stoked a fire in him he could not explain, and that others had never kindled. She might not have the same understanding of culture that he did, but ultimately, when it came right down to it, she was a woman, with the very same desires and intentions, just less training in how to go about getting what she wanted. Lunar is started to feel fortunate to experience this, and not have been badly injured in the process. He imagined it could have gone a lot more painfully for him with no different result.

“Wolf likes this, yes? This is nice for wolf captains.” She leaned down, nuzzling at his chin again with her dark, flaring nose pad, sampling in scent in a primal fashion, more than would seem polite for an Amanian girl.

“Sure looks like he likes it.” Shelsie said. Kenarra shushed her in a panicked tone. They were in more than enough trouble already. Lunar is rolled those modest breasts in his powerful hands achingly, letting Reika feel a bit of return affection. Maybe she would be happy if she just explored his body a bit if he could get her to reach her sexual satisfaction without full intimacy with him. After all, she might have really only been riled up by the fight, close contact with someone she viewed as strong and capable. If he could put out the fire he kindled in her, she might not have to put out the one she had certainly stoked in him.

“Turn around, Reika, let me give you a gift on the occasion of our friendship.” Lunar is said eloquently, his hips tightening and relaxing already a bit as she squeezed his glans in her hand to tease it in her palm. She seemed to know a little about male anatomy at least. Enough to verify what she had said. She was not entirely new to this.

“Reika is not done yet.” There could be no doubting that she was not done, but Lunar is nodded and smiled to her.

“You don’t have to stop, just turn around, move your hips over my chest. I have a rare treat for you. Something you maybe haven’t had before. Gotta slip out of your pants first. It’s only fair, since you have mine off.” To illustrate, he wriggled a bit and finished kicking off his own trousers. His silken shirt was still on, but it really wasn’t in the girl’s way. Not for what she was after, at least. Reika looked skeptically at the other guards. Shelsie spoke up.

“It’s okay, Reika, he’s right. I think I know what he’s gonna give you. You will like it. I know I would –ow!” Kenarra put a hand to the back of the answering girl’s head. Lunar is arched a brow. He hadn’t known how playful Shelsie was. He made a mental note of it for later. The hyena, however, seemed to take those words to heart, and lifted her hips up, struggling out of her somewhat dirty pants, the leather trousers having taken a bit of a beating in her travels, and even more in the fight with Lunar is.

The scent of hyena in dire need of sex wafted over all three of them. Kenarra fanned herself. There was certainly no doubt now what Reika was after. She then settled with her hips over the wolf’s chest, looking back up at Shelsie.

“Is like this, yes? And Reika still has this...” she wrapped a hand around the thickened spire of dark lupine flesh before her, slowly drawing a hand up and down that length with careful and sensual curiosity. She was not sure of what she was doing, it seemed, but she got the general idea. She felt her hips tugged downward, and she looked back over her shoulder. “What you doing, wolf, you not bite Reika, she will bite back and is hurting HHHUUH!” her eyes snapped shut as Lunar is’ mouth sealed over her puffy folds and a long, powerful tongue spread her slick, musky flesh tightly around it, dipping into her honeypot with an eager, hot determination. Lunar is had seen Alps do this the day he played with Nita and Nidaja in the clearing on that day of practice, and had actually always wanted to give it a try. This was a perfect place for it, as it kept Reika’s womanhood occupied and might well satisfy her needs. At least for that moment.

“Reika is a strong Asuna. Only strong girls are given that gift.” Shelsie offered,

squirming a bit. Lunar is knew that the guard was trying to encourage Reika to enjoy it, and let Lunar is finish her like that, because it would mean she was strong, and could make a wolf do that for her. He made a mental note of forgiveness for her earlier impertinence for catching on to his plan, and attempting to help him out. Kenarra, however, was silently in shock as she watched that pink tongue slip from his charcoal muzzle, plunging deep inside the hyena as she rolled her hips with pronounced lust.

“Nnuuuhhh... Reika likes treat. Is a good treat from wolf. Reika likes ... nnnnhh... Reika is liking...” She lowered her head, and resumed stroking the dark wolf’s pulsing cock. Lunar is realized with a bit of dread that while he was doing this, he could not prevent his arousal and the sense of need boiling in him so readily. The scent of her sex and her sounds of pleasure were impossible to ignore. Still, he hoped that he could entice Reika to enjoy just his tongue and not have to suffer his subordinates seeing him sink his pulsing flesh into a very obviously willing hyena. This was already likely to affect the level of control he had as a commander, which was hard for a male in his culture anyway.

Reika closed her eyes tightly and pushed herself back against that stroking, probing tongue, her muscles shaking softly as she experienced something entirely new. Lunar is pushed his strong hands to either side of her rump to keep her from pushing herself too hard against him as she panted out freely, hands slipping up and down his thick masculinity. The hyena licked her hand finally, and the dark-furred wolf groaned as the lady Asuna slipped her wet hand up and down his eager spire, wet and slick. He let his thighs part a bit and flicked that little nub he knew quite well to get little shocks to jerk through Reika’s hide. The girl rolled her hips slowly but with determination as she stroked the lupine’s dark flesh in her trembling hand.

“Don’t worry, Lunar is... We aren’t gonna tell anyone about this.” Shelsie offered. Lunar is thought to himself that they knew better, but he was still very much not in control of the situation, and found himself hating that less and less. He pushed his tongue tight to that slick entrance, the heated hyena shaking softly, holding still for a bit as he slithered that long flexible tongue between her tangy folds.

“Nngguuh!” Reika barked out unintelligibly, and doubled over as her already soaking pussy convulsed and became even wetter, dribbling onto his chest as the hyena slipped happily and hotly into climax. Lunar is wagged his tail a bit at that. It was not hard at all to bring her to it. This was a good thing. Hopefully she would feel that she got what she was after and roll off of him to relax and recover.

Nope.

The hyena turned around, her hips hovering over his lap. Lunar is moved his hands over his head. Fuck it all. He knew better than to try to keep her from what she needed, especially now. He looked up at her sand-colored spotted body, and found himself shamefully liking what he saw, even though he knew the girl was more than a bit unbalanced. Still, she was not immature, just given to emotional extremes. This was certainly one of them. He just hoped the one who identified himself as her brother didn’t kill him for this. He didn’t think on that line too long, as he was wonderfully distracted by his thick cock slipping easily, deeply into tight hyena

honeypot, squeezing rhythmically around him as his hips pushed up to meet her own. The lupine guard captain placed his hands on Reika's hips and pulled her down tighter into his lap as she groaned happily.

"We won't tell a soul..." Kenarra huffed out in a near whimper. Lunar is looked up as the grey-furred lady wolf slipped down alongside him, looking into his eyes. He moved a hand over to her to try to dismiss her, he didn't need help, but she simply snared his hand and placed it on her chest. Lunar is groaned as Reika rose up, drawing herself almost fully off of his cock in her suckling depths, and then pushed hard back down, so wet and steamy around him. It was pleasure as he'd needed for a long, long time. His duty often prevented him from seeking it out, so he found himself less and less unhappy that it sought him out instead.

"Kenna!" Shelsie barked out in surprise, a little alarmed, perhaps, at the forwardness of her guard companion. Shelsie stood close by, watching as Kenarra moved her captain's hand across her bosom. Lunar is gave that uniformed mammary a fond squeeze, knowing that seeing this ignited fires in the lovely wolf female that she was having trouble controlling. After all, he wasn't able to control his anymore either. He slipped that hand down from her chest, to the leather-plated skirt that she wore, and then underneath it. Kenarra made her feelings on this intrusion known with a rolling moan, her hips pushing down to meet his fingertips as they pulled her silky undergarment easily to the side, finding the fabric already soaking wet, and then pushed two fingers deeply inside her, using his thumb in a swirling, rolling fashion on her clit.

"Yes captain, oh yesss!" she hissed, her hands coming to her own chest, pinching her nipples hard through the thick fabric of her uniform top. Shelsie watched in stunned silence, squirming a bit as the hyena began to firmly bounce on her commanding officer's cock, making a bit of a show of it as she leaned back and stroked the fluff of her mound as that black length pistoned in and out of her suckling depths. She began to jerk her hips heavily, staggering a bit, before erupting in a hot cry of delight as she burst around her playmate again. Kenarra jerked her own hips softly, seeming to try harder to join Reika's release, but she still had a way to go.

"Reika, I'll cum if you keep going like that." Lunar is rumbled to the hyena, in case she did not wish to be defiled inside by a wolf. He had no idea how the Asuna female might view what was very close to happening if she had a chance to think about it. She only sped up, grunting savagely.

"Yes, wolf. Do! Do for Reika!" she exclaimed, her hips bumping harder to his. Kenarra's honey poured down Lunar is' knuckles and his forearm as she cried out with joyful release. The words exchanged between the wolf and hyena were too incensing, and her tight pussy convulsed hard around those strong fingers, which Lunar is now pounded in and out of her clutching sex mercilessly. Shelsie made some anxious sound, and crumbled to her knees as well. Reika cried out happily, squeezing tight around the wolf inside her again, and then pulled Shelsie closer.

"Come play! Wolfs is too serious all of time. Play with Reika and wolf captain." The hyena drew Shelsie over Lunar is, who understood immediately what the very amicable hyena was offering her new guard friends. Males were a sharable commodity to her, and she was

making nice for her friends and being generous, at the wolf's expense. However, as he neared his climax, Lunar is didn't mind being treated like a shared plaything. He was about to squirt, and would not have the mind to do this much longer, so he intended to make sure Shelsie and Kenarra were bound to secrecy by their own indiscretions. He pulled the skirted wolf's hips over his head, hand still pumping under Kenarra's skirt off to his side. He used his cool, panting-dried nose pad to push Shelsie's panties to the side, off of her soaking lips, and pushed his tongue as deep into the wolf as possible, making her almost immediately erupt into a desperate moan of pleasure.

"Lucky bitch!" Kenarra said, and just folded in half again, shuddering as she burst around those stroking digits again. Lunar is' mind was reeling. He had never so much as expressed interest in his subordinates, as it showed a conflict of duty for the male captain. It was rare for males to hold such a station, and this showed a total lack of control, but he was lost to it now. He had Kenarra on one hand, ravaged by climax, Shelsie near eruption over his muzzle, and Reika bursting in his lap all over again, wailing happily with her release as she held Shelsie's shoulders to facilitate her bouncing.

Lunar is tried hard to focus on pleasuring Shelsie, since she was only getting started, and pushed his tongue heavily in and out of her tight slit. She was a bit tarter than the hyena, but the guard captain felt that it was because she had controlled her arousal longer, though she couldn't anymore. Lunar is held the base of her tail to keep her hips right where they were, his long, powerful tongue dipping in deep, and flicking back out hard, the tip teasing over her clit with each stroke as she began to easily slide into her role of pleasure, her body tightening and relaxing. The wolf held nothing back from her as he felt his sack draw up. It was too much. He was not used to this kind of activity and his training did nothing to prepare him for it. Even as he tried to force his mind to think of something else a moment, to not let the physical pleasure overwhelm him, nothing could keep him from cumming.

The wolf captain arched his back and growled savagely as his thick seed sprayed violently inside that stroking glove of Reika's sex, making the hyena scream with delight. Shelsie went off like a bomb over his muzzle, splashing his whiskers as she joined in Reika's scream of pleasure. Kenarra, already cumming, just shook helplessly over Lunar is' quivering hand as he was unable to keep pumping her through his climax. He slapped Shelsie's sex hard and fast with his weakening tongue as he panted in raspy bursts, face scented in wolf and hyena honey, his hands a mess, his hips soaked in Reika's cum and his own. The four were in an utter mess of convulsing, growling, crying joy. It was by far the most lawlessly depraved and desperately feral thing he'd ever been a party to. And he loved it. The wolf darkly let himself think of repeat opportunities like this, or sharing other encounters with his subordinates, even though it was against the rules. The rules did not exist here in this forest, however. Reika had seen to that. The lady wolf over her captain's face fell to the side in front of the other lupine on all fours over Lunar is' now limp and inactive hand. Kenarra wagged her tail as she looked at Shelsie.

"Fun?" she asked pleasantly. Shelsie wagged her tail happily. Lunar is could feel Reika's short little hyena tail drumming between his thighs as he continued to throb heavily inside her snug and heated channel. He could feel some of his own thick seed rolling down his dark,

relaxing sack. The black lupine laid his head back and sighed heavily.

“Guards... remember!” he stated loudly, “Be very cautious with Asuna. They are strong, proud, and very cunning. Three lupine guards, one a captain, are now laying almost helpless on the forest floor, and a single hyena considered it a pleasure.” He smiled to Reika, who smiled back cheekily.

“You is sweet talking Reika.” The Asuna female said softly, before leaning down and softly, supply kissing Lunaris’ lips. Kenarra rolled onto her side beside Shelsie, panting hotly, unbuttoning her uniform top to let it breathe a bit.

“I agree. Cunning and unpredictable. A marvelous culture, the Asuna.” She gave a weak, happy laugh as her companion rested, dazed and happy beside her.

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Alps clung to the side of a rock face, the wind whipping over his fur, Nidaja clutching at his shoulder as they scooted along slowly, making very little progress. The drop seemed to be endless below the little ledge they clung to, only a fourth as wide as an average hallway, and the wind threatened to pull them both off at any minute. The general and her slave companion had appeared in a small cave after touching the light, and on the outside there was only this ledge, one direction going down, and the other going up. A bit of discussion followed where the white wolf stated to the general that he had no idea which direction this person might be in, but he didn’t want to try to climb higher with the wind when they could not even see the top because of how steep the mountain was.

Nidaja, however, had a more tactical and logical approach to the issue. They didn’t know, due to clouds or fog down below, how high up they already were, and if the person turned out to be on top of the mountain, it might be harder if not impossible to get back up from the bottom because of how tiring it would be. It would take less time and energy to check the top first, and then go back down if they had to. Alps reluctantly finally agreed to Nidaja’s logic. It made more sense, as much as he didn’t like going up. They had been clinging to this ledge for what felt like four hours, shifting and moving upward at an angle. Alps was certain they had actually gone around the mountain itself once already, completely, but they dared not look down to see if they were passing the cave again. They steeled their courage and just kept going right up the side of the mountain.

There were a few moments where Alps thought he might slip, but the fear there was merely of the unpleasant sensation of falling, and the pain of impact. There was no mortal risk in this place. The Shadowfall was designed to prolong suffering to eternity, not result in a quick death. The pair clung to the jagged rock face and fought their way around, before reaching a point that seemed to open up a bit with a wider path, though a steeper climb along the side of the



mountain made the journey more grueling if less treacherous.

“I am going... to guess...” Nidaja panted heavily as she plodded ahead of Alps, “That whoever this is trapped here is... extremely afraid of heights.” The slave got a bit of a chuckle at that.

“Well, it is possible, yes. They could very well be so petrified that they are stuck at a little point at the very top. We will see when we get there. It looks like we are almost at the top.” Alps was a bit more used to relentless work from his life with Chana and was not quite as out of breath, but he still panted from the exertion. Nidaja said softly,

“We can’t be killed if we fall, you said. So, it would be okay, if the person is not up here to just... jump down, right? That would be the easy way.” The general nodded at the idea, part of her greater plan to get out faster.

“You would not die, so I was told, but you would still feel the landing. I bet it would not be enjoyable.” Alps explained under his breath, making Nidaja cringe. She had felt pleasure in the Shadowfall so far, but not suffering. Alps figured she would avoid the thought of that in the future.

“We are coming to the top.” Nidaja said with a bit of caution, putting her hand on the hilt of her sword.

“You should not need that.” Alps told the general, as they crested the mountaintop. There, on the very top of the mountain there was an odd clearing lined in stone slabs arranged like columns, broken and grey and sad. There was, in the very middle, a rock-like throne, burned and black. Sitting upon it was a figure.

“Is that her? The priestess trapped here?” Nidaja asked in a whisper.

“It should be. We might as well introduce ourselves.” Alps stated confidently. “Carefully, we may startle her... I can promise we aren’t expected.” He padded out in front of the throne outside the circular row of jagged grey stone columns. He and Nidaja both moved into the circle in front of the throne to see, sitting there, a black-furred male lupine, instead of the priestess that he expected. He stood there, looking up at him, perplexed. The wolf on the scorched throne seemed to be sleeping, an elbow up on the arm rest of his horrid chair, his chin resting on the heel of his palm. He was a rather young-looking male, his hair somewhat long and wild, tendrils of it pulled back past his cheeks, with one long one bouncing down in alongside his muzzle stiffly, suggesting the wolf used some kind of material to make his hair ridged for a sense of style. He wore dark robes with a silver trim, similar to something that Alps had seen before. He was not sure where. His physical appearance did not suggest he was overly strong; in fact, he had more the appearance of a student in a library. He was light-framed and pristine, free of injuries to suggest he fought in battle. Alps had not expected this youthful wolf to be there in the place of a priestess who likely fought, and lost, a war.

“Not a priestess this time.” Nidaja said in a whisper. “But if you still want to draw

essence, go for it. I won't tell anyone." The general smiled wryly, her teeth bared in utter mirth as she whispered that into Alps' ears, wagging her tail. The soft words did not seem to get the black-furred wolf's attention.

"Are you awake?" Alps asked loudly, his voice echoing a bit. The lupine opened his eyes, staring off in the direction his head had been facing, which was not looking at Alps and Nidaja. His irises were an odd crimson hue, but he seemed pretty normal otherwise.

"What?" he asked softly, seeming almost confused at his own words. "Talking. Speaking. Was I talking? Am I talking?" He murmured louder.

"No, it's me. I'm talking." Alps stated firmly. He wondered if the guy had become a bit detached in his time here. He assumed it was possible to run into people who had gone crazy.

"Who is me?" the lupine asked, turning his head, and finally spotting the pair. "Oh hey... A new level of crazy fantasy approaches." He smiled a bit. Alps smiled back.

"Are you ready to be rescued from this place?" he asked the wolf on the throne proudly.

"Huh? No, I'm ready to go insane. You showing up here is all the proof I need of that." the stranger stated.

"You haven't gone crazy." Nidaja said openly. "I mean, not more crazy at least. This is real." She waved a hand to everything else. "Well, this isn't, but we are. And we can get out of here." She seemed to comfort herself in saying that. Alps looked to her, and then back to the victim of the Shadowfall.

"It's been a terribly long time, but please believe us. This is actually happening." The slave approached the throne and held out his hand. The guy sitting down rolled his eyes a bit, and held out a hand toward Alps.

"I cannot believe that my sleep is being interrupted by a dream. That is so unfair. Be gone." Alps blinked at the black-furred stranger's words, and then yelped as an arc of red light leapt from the outstretched palm of the seemingly indifferent lupine. Alps didn't feel pain, but he was launched backward, and did feel a bit of discomfort as he skidded to a stop well past the barrier of stone slabs. Nidaja barked out angrily.

"What the hell! We are here to help, not pick a fight!" Her words were forceful, and she put her hand on her sword. He looked up a bit more curiously.

"Longer-lived fantasies this time, I see." He got up off his throne. "What must I do to put an end to you so I can go back to sleep? I don't like being awake. I don't like thinking. I don't like remembering. Go away." He sent another bolt into Alps, which pushed him toward the edge of the cliff. The energy bolt itself, despite looking like crimson lightning, didn't hurt at all.

"I'm not a fantasy, quit it!" Alps barked, sitting back up, and clutching at the rocky ground to keep from being pushed over the edge. The lightning-casting prisoner of the crystal knelt down by Alps.

"Well, first off, if you were real, you'd not be capable of talking after that kind of attack, and second, you have no reason to go into a Shadowfall crystal to release me. Especially not me in particular, and finally, even if you were here to release me, it's laughable, since no one can get out. Trust me, if I cannot get out, you most certainly cannot get out." He smiled a bit, and caused Alps to close his eyes as the slave was bolted right in the face. Still no pain, but it was too bright to look at, getting right in his eyes.

"I said stop it, you silly shit!" Nidaja barked from behind the talking males, and put her boot right into the side of the threatening male's head. Alps was impressed by the somersaulting arc that the general got off her kick. The wolf rested on his back a bit.

"I will admit... that is new for crazy. I felt that one." He sat up a bit, and then cast that same red bolt at Nidaja. She screamed and crumpled onto the ground, clutching her chest where she had been struck. Alps got up quickly, a sense of panic flooding him. That hurt Nidaja. It didn't hurt him, but it hurt Nidaja. He watched as the dark-furred lupine padded over toward the fallen general, who continued to clutch her chest, wheezing in stunned pain.

"Leave her alone, I said we are here to help!" the white wolf shouted.

"Sure you are. I think I can get rid of this specter first and then I can deal with you. So many fantasies to trouble my already troubled mind in this place. I have put so many of you to bed that I could write a book on how to do it." He held a hand up, aiming at Nidaja again.

"No!" Nidaja cried, drawing her sword. She swung at the wolf, Alps cringing in fear. This was not going the way it was supposed to at all. They could not kill each other, but he was not likely to gain any essence off a fight that could last forever. The sword connected. Off came an arm. A new one faded into being where the first one had been. The general's attacker looked at his new arm.

"You seem so real. None of my other fantasies actually caused me pain like you do. And yet, the other one doesn't seem to feel pain." He seemed to marvel at this as Nidaja looked at the severed arm on the ground, and back at the new one.

"Okay, I admit, I don't know how to fight this kind of fight... Got any ideas, Alps?" she asked, looking back to her lover.

"Fighting him won't do much good here." The slave approached cautiously. He didn't know what abilities this person had. He had seen Luna heal the landscape of her Shadowfall, but he didn't know what other Letai could do. It seemed to really cause Nidaja pain though.

"You seem to care a lot about the girl." Alps looked back to the other male as he spoke. "As soon as you go away... I stop doing this." He held out his hand, and Nidaja folded up like a

love-letter, dropping to the ground and howling in agony as that red light struck her, and kept pounding her, as if he was kicking her with it.

Alps was always a very forgiving and non-aggressive sort when it came to himself, but seeing Nidaja tortured like that lit a fire in him that he had never felt before. He didn't want the dark-furred lupine to merely stop at this point, he wanted him crushed for daring to make his beloved general cry out like that. He reached for his own weapon, only to remember that he brought nothing like that with him. He felt the ball of that Letai relic in his hip pouch. He paused, gritting his teeth. Ellis had called it Ressaia, noting that it was a Letai weapon. Perhaps this Letai would recognize it and understand that Alps' threat was real. He took out the sphere and held it up.

"Stop it, or I will make you stop it." He said, his hand trembling as he held the mirror polished silvery-green ball in his hand. The metal felt different here. It was warm, as if it were a lump of flesh, not metal. The lightning stopped, and Nidaja jerked the wolf's legs out from under him, before scrambling over behind Alps.

"Alps, let's just go... I can't take that anymore. It feels like I'm having my guts stomped on!" Nidaja growled. "Leave his sorry ass here to rot, he's worthless if he treats the people who are here to save him that way."

"I don't know what that is, but it's hardly enough to make me stop... I suggest you follow your friend's advice, phantoms, and just leave me to my suffering like all the other dreams I have had." The dark wolf sat on his throne again. Alps gritted his teeth.

"You would not be saying or doing these things if you believed me. Maybe I will leave you yet, but you will know that I am real..." Alps began trying to well up energy the way that Rios had taught him. He'd have to get in close, but if he could, he would touch the male there with his own essence. Someone with Letai training would recognize essence. He would know then that Alps was no phantom.

"Come on over then. Prove it to me." the confident figure said as he relaxed on his burned out throne. Alps began to advance, welling up his essence more and more. He felt it flood him less like it did in the real world, and more like it had when he tapped into the essence that he knew was forbidden. The slave felt it possible that this forbidden essence was all he had access to here, though. It's where his power, his ability to move around, and his ability to escape came from.

As Alps advanced, the lightning crackled from the outstretched palm of his misguided adversary, but still it did not so much as push back against him, making the wolf push slowly forward, holding that sphere. Something odd happened as the slave welled his essence, however. He was not even aware of a chance until the flash of green entered his peripheral vision. The ball of glassy metal had changed form outright, seeming to take the shape of a slender wooden staff, slightly larger up top, and a little squared off. The wolf held it in front of him, and the lightening terminated at the top of the staff versus the white lupine's chest. That certainly made it easier to walk. Alps wondered, as he plodded toward the now very nervous-looking black

wolf, if Ressaia had something to do with the lightning not affecting him. He began to understand what Ellis meant by its limited usefulness. He looked grim and determined as he held the staff out, pushing more of his essence into it. It did not change shape further, but it felt strong in his hands. He felt safer with it, protecting himself.

“What are you?!” shouted the wolf. “Why won’t you leave me in peace?!” Alps finally shouted back, over the loud, low hum of that red bolt of seemingly endless energy.

“I am Alps, servant to the Amanian Empire and to the Head of the Royal House. I won’t leave you until you know that the opportunity I offer you is real!” and with that, he pushed his own hand out, and tried to focus on something different entirely from what he was doing. He put his thoughts and heart into the gift he’d given Nidaja when they met again in Rios’ palace... the technique that Alps had learned from the Asuna empress. Alps pushed stored up positive life essence into the attacking lupine with as much force and confidence as he could muster.

It appeared to be enough. The wolf made a startled half-cry, and then sank into the throne as Alps put his palm against his chest. He let that energy flow through the dark-furred lupine as he slumped into the chair, shaking a bit.

“What... What is this...?” he asked.

“It’s real. The Shadowfall would never let you feel this if it were not real. Think about it. You can only suffer in this place unless I am telling the truth...” Nidaja had begun to approach again. Her expression of shock, as Alps turned to check and make sure she was okay, was far beyond that of just being attacked by this. It took a moment of standing there while the other wolf just quietly thought about what Alps had said before Alps figured out the expression of shock. Nidaja had just seen the slave fight an essence-battle with a weapon that she had never seen used before. Of course she was a little at a loss for words. Alps stopped sending his essence into the staff and it coiled back into a little glassy ball.

“If I follow you, you will vanish. This is part of the Shadowfall. You make me think of hope for something different from the last several hundred years, and then the rocks all turn to laughing faces when I delight and agree to be free. I know this place far better than you know.” He stood up, straightening his robes. “This is by far more interesting than my other fantasies, so I think I will just continue along with you for now. It’s worth getting up and walking around, I suppose.” He seemed a bit smug in his assessment of the situation.

“I don’t care.” Alps said with equal confidence. “When you are out of this place, there will be plenty of time for you to believe me.” Nidaja walked up to the dark wolf and glared at him.

“I honestly don’t think you are worth our time wasted here. We climbed a fucking mountain for you. You could at least be thankful for that, even if we were not real.” She growled. Alps gritted his teeth. Yes, it was possible the general might still be a little sore about the lightning in her guts thing. He could not blame her.

“Alright, I appreciate it then. Besides, as half-breeds go, I admit you are actually kinda cute.” His words were flirty and light-hearted in comparison to the hardened and severe attitude that he presented earlier. Unfortunately, his words did not win him any awards for charm, and Alps could not even interject before the green-furred general arched back and then brought her head forward as hard as she could, head-butting the wolf hard enough in the face that he folded over backwards, legs kicking out like springs when the back of his head connected loudly with the hard stone of the mountaintop. Alps gaped.

“And for a Letai worthy of getting himself Shadowfallen, you are awfully fucking squishy.” Nidaja growled, before stalking off, adjusting her headband. Alps looked at the now profusely bleeding black wolf on the ground.

“She’s strong-willed.” The slave spoke softly as not to get himself into trouble.

“Very curious indeed...” the youthful-looking black lupine remarked as he blew his errant tendril of hair out from in front of his crimson eyes. “Very curious indeed.”

## Sirius, Book III

### *The Essence*

*Comments or Questions?*

*Contact Alps:* [sarsis@gmail.com](mailto:sarsis@gmail.com)

*Or just drop a note at:* <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/sarsis/>

## Chapter 17

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The scenery was again familiar, but Alps was somewhat surprised. He had only freed one individual from the Shadowfall other than Nidaja. He had only taken one session of essence-drawing with her, and as potent as it was, he did not think it would be enough, but there he stood, standing on what appeared to be thick, translucent glass with endlessly tall glass walls blocking them in either direction, just as he had when he stood in the crystal with Ceriss, Luna, and Ellis. It looked the same as it had when he had broken free the last time. It was bright enough that seeing the light of another who might be trapped in the crystal would not be possible. Still, Alps knew then that he could come back to the crystal and save others when he was not desperately needing to get Nidaja home, so he didn't need to stay longer than was absolutely necessary just to fetch them. The souls lost to this place had been here for centuries. The equivalent of a few more months, days, or years would not have made much difference. The black-furred wolf spoke softly,

"This is not possible. This is some kind of illusion of the Shadowfall. They are all ultimately illusions. Even if you are real, and have somehow found me, we aren't getting out. Not with our own essence." Alps turned around, still holding one of Nidaja's hands, while Nidaja held that of the other wolf, reluctantly. He had immediately ceased with the bleeding that he had been doing after she head-butted him violently to the ground. Injuries in this place healed almost immediately, it seemed, or perhaps that was the Letai male's own doing. Either way, he didn't seem to hate Nidaja for it. To him, she was still most likely a figment of his imagination.

"Impossible or not, this is my third trip into this place. You will be out soon." Alps stated calmly. The other male seemed perplexed. To the slave, he seemed even a little distressed, like he was fearful of leaving. Then again, everything in this place until then had been things he likely was able to predict because of what he knew. Alps and Nidaja were unpredictable and uncontrollable. This either represented the impossible, which was frightening, or it was evidence of an unstoppable descent into madness, which was equally distressing. The white wolf could not fault him for being a bit uncomfortable at that moment. The dark-furred lupine spoke again, his tone wavering,

"This can't be. The place uses your own essence to strengthen its hold on you. The more of your own essence you use here, the harder it works to fulfill your nightmares." His words were full of experience. He seemed to know more about the Shadowfall than others had told Alps. He knew as much as that book had told him, and

more. It stood to reason, for Alps, that this was more than enough reason for Mannus to have wanted to lock him away. This kind of understanding was dangerous.

“I know, I read that recently.” Alps replied to him, walking over toward one of the glass walls. He would break it. He would escape from this place just like last time, and he would be back in his lover’s arms, perhaps finally for good.

“If you know you can’t use your life essence to get out of here, what do you intend on doing?” the dark lupine asked, hooking a thumb in the belt of his robes, seeming a bit haughty as he questioned the slave. Alps shrugged a bit, and said,

“I won’t be using my own essence. I have to break the rules a little. Sorry about that.” The white-furred male was very much aware of the taboo of what he was doing, but there was no avoiding it.

“The Nether then? Won’t work. I tried it. Believe me, I would not still have been sitting around on a rock if there were still more things for me to try.” The other lupine said this with a sigh of resignation, as if Alps had gotten his hopes up for nothing. The slave arched his brow, however, because the admission that this fellow had tried to do that was a bit strange. It was taboo, so he had assumed it would not be attempted or even thought of. What did this person know of the Nether?

“Then you did it wrong.” Nidaja answered before her lover could say anything. “I have watched him shatter a crystal he was in and deliver three others with him. I am not afraid because I know he can do it. I will not listen to you talking down to him and trying to shake his confidence while we are trying to leave.” Their new companion shook his head a bit, looking frustrated, as if trying to explain something very complicated when there was more important work to be done.

“Using the nether to get out of this place would be like trying to break through the walls by using the opposite wall. The amount of force that it would take to do so is far beyond the abilities of an essence user. That kind of control of the nether is not possible.” Their guest was very dark in the way he said this. “The very nature of that source of power makes it violent and unpredictable. Even if you used that power to get in, you don’t use it to get out.” Nidaja narrowed her eyes, and the wolf grunted in pain. Alps only assumed that she was crushing his hand. The slave spoke up.

“Stop, Nidaja. He’s had a long time to formulate his beliefs about the place. He is not entirely wrong. I don’t use just the nether to get out.” Alps thought a moment, placing a hand on the thick, seemingly forever-deep wall of the crystal. It was starting to make more sense to him, that last moment before he freed himself. Bringing himself into the Shadowfall was about balance. He had to create a mirror of his own essence and Nidaja’s in order to let them slip into the crystal. While they were here, there were two images of them. He readily thought of this, not as a theory, but more like someone had once told him.



“Well, that cinches it then. Here we are, right at the exit, and the door’s locked, is that it – *Ow!*” The general gave the black-furred wolf another crushing squeeze.

“Shut up and let him think. He’s far cleverer than that. You just wait until I get you out where hurting you is going to *matter*, you twit.” Alps cast a glance to Nidaja, and she backed off. He released their hands. They would be fine as long as they remained close. Nidaja still held the other’s hand, however, as it was her avenue to cause him pain. Alps could not blame her, really. This one was socially unpracticed, it seemed.

“There is a way. I did it instinctively last time, but I think I am beginning to understand it now.” Alps spoke softly, his eyes closing. The two images, himself and the nether image, they were involved... What had been said? Someone had said... It was a lady’s voice, long ago. It was in his childhood. There were two kinds of essence at work in this place. Life essence, and the nether. The Letai knew control of life essence by giving it a charge. They drew upon energy that was charged, it had to be a definite emotional state, but nether energy had no charge. It was just there, and that’s what made it so violent and unpredictable. But Alps remembered, somehow, that he was told differently. It was true that Nether essence had no charge, but it didn’t mean it could not take one. Just as iron could hold a charge if lightning struck it, Nether could hold a charge if sufficient energy was applied to it. Alps opened his eyes. That was what happened when he left with Luna and Ceriss and Ellis. He had felt that joy at hearing Nita’s voice through the crystal, and he pushed that joy at the crystal wall, thinking that was what shattered it, but it didn’t. He pushed that intensely charged essence hard into the nether reflection of himself and perhaps the others, and the reaction was violent enough to break the Shadowfall. He understood now. He was not sure how, but it made complete sense, like a simple lesson of arithmetic.

“Alps, there is no hurry. If you need more essence, I will gladly allow you to draw upon mine again. The naysayer can enjoy watching that if he wants.” Nidaja gave a wry grin to him. The black wolf folded his ears back.

“That... sounds like a nice plan...” he let his eyes wander up and down Nidaja’s body before arching his eyebrows. She pulled him at her, to head-butt him again, but he managed to avoid it this time. “Temper, temper!” he laughed. “The Emerald Amanians used to have such a sense of humor.” Alps shook his head at that and spoke, finally.

“Are you both ready to get out of here?” he asked. Nidaja stood at attention.

“Yes!” she barked. “Hopefully, they will have lunch ready for us when we get back.” The general stood with her back to the wall of the crystal, and looked into Alps’ eyes. “I am ready.” She smiled brightly and took one of Alps’ hands. The other wolf stepped alongside Nidaja, and shook his head.

“I still don’t believe any of this is real, but it is by far the most interesting delusion I have ever had.” He shrugged his shoulders and took Alps’ other hand. “Ready

when you are.” Alps smiled to the other male wolf. It was about to be a very long-lived fantasy at that.

The white lupine could see their reflections in the glassy surface of the crystal wall, so he was able to see it as he began to let his spirits rise, his joy magnified by thoughts of being back home, and protecting his friends, of saving the Asuna the way he did, of bringing happiness to those around him. He thought of his friends, and how hard they fought for him, and how much love they had given to him. There was the thought he needed. They gave to him every bit as much as he wanted to give for them. There was no disparity. He was cherished, and he belonged. Nothing could stop that now, even his absence from them. He felt the heat of his joy ignite his essence, and he smiled, looking at Nidaja as he flooded the Nether image of essence that mirrored his own. The effect was immediate. Nidaja’s eyes went wide, but not as wide as her dark-furred neighbor’s. Last time in the crystal he was aware Luna and the others had seen something, but now, seeing his reflection in the wall of the crystal, he was finally aware of what it was they had glimpsed.

In his reflection, he saw himself bathed in white light, as if by sunshine coming from outside of the crystal, but without an actual source or sunbeam. His fur was just exceedingly bright, and from between his shoulders erupted two large, white wings which were broad and powerful-looking. He recognized them immediately somehow, as if again from a school lesson. They were a reflection of his own essence, a manifestation of power too intense for him to keep entirely within. They were perhaps intangible, as he felt no weight from them, but they were certainly visible. Tears rolled down Nidaja’s muzzle as she gazed at him in such a fashion that told the slave she was committing those ethereal wings to memory. She would absolutely not forget what he looked like in that moment. He smiled lovingly to her, and then sent his will into the crystal. It was not much different than how he sent his will to move in the darkness when he first got here, but his command was not to move. This time, his command was simple and very direct.

“Free us.”

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The brightly glowing crystal sat on a small stone altar that Nita had brought into the little meeting hall separate from the throne room. The place was rather utilitarian, no furniture, save for that altar, and just carpet and blank walls. The wind whipped around her as she watched the crystal pulse with energy. He was coming back. It had been hardly any wait at all, and he was already coming back. She clasped her hands with hope and joy as she watched the pulsating light from the crystal. That light was her lover. Only the day before she had seen it shine, like a pinpoint the same as it had been before in the beginning. It had flooded her with hope and joy because she knew it to be a sign that the impossible he had done before was about to happen again. It was him, fighting his way out of the bonds of darkness that even other Letai could not break.

“Soon now! I can feel his energy, even outside the crystal!” called Luna. She stood at the queen’s side. Misty was also there, her bright blue robes blowing in the heavy wind, hands pushed down to keep herself modest. She was watching everything carefully, ready to write all this down later. It was still historic because this was the first time someone had gone in and left the crystal willingly. This was a very big deal to her in ways that Nita did not quite understand. The councilor seemed to think it opened up serious defensive possibilities. Nita doubted anyone would want to actually go into the crystals, even with the thought that they could get back out again. Her own violet robes fluttered and flitted in the wind, but two heavy leather belts laced down her thighs in decoration kept them from drawing up like Misty’s did. Luna’s own green and gold robes seemed to be heavy enough on their own not to be interfered with by the wind.

The crystal pulsed brighter, everyone standing back. Misty pushed her goggles on, intending to watch the explosion that she missed last time when she flinched. She did not have to wait long.

With a bright white flash, the three people in the room were now six. Misty cheered, joyful of having seen the eruption of the three from the crystal. Nita was a bit blinded by the light, so the figures were a little hard to make out, but one of them, for a second or two, seemed winged. The shapes shifted and changed a little, until she easily recognized Alps standing there, and Nidaja, and a stranger. She rubbed her eyes a bit, and smiled at her beloved.

“Welcome home love. And to the one who has rejoined us at long last, welcome to Castle Diera.” Alps smiled back at Nita, and then looked over to the other male wolf. He seemed in shock. Of course he would be. Everything he believed was just proven wrong. Alps resumed his look about, happy to see Misty, who was still bouncing excitedly about this historic moment. Then there was beautiful Luna, but something was not right.

She did not look happy. She looked shocked and horrified. Had she been hurt when the crystal burst? Nita seemed to notice too, given her lover’s look of concern at the priestess. Alps looked back at the other dark wolf, who now appeared to obviously be staring at Luna with the same look of unrestrained horror.

“Ummm...” Alps tried to break the awkward silence as Misty quieted down, realizing there was some kind of conflict. It was Luna who moved first, eyes narrowed in a look of utter rage Alps thought her to be incapable of, and then her severe, shouted words,

“*Linista'tir osfor tirhurelda eldanardae!*” she cried, and a stroke of lightning connected between her suddenly outstretched hand and what would have been the new wolf’s face. He managed to push a glowing green mist between him and her, but the force of the bolt sent him and the hastily erected small shield of light sailing back, slamming him against the wall. She put both her hands out, and he slid up the wall rather than down it, grunting and hacking a bit. Alps stood there in dumbfounded silence.

What the hell was going on? Why would Luna attack this person? Did she know him? Was it not just Nidaja, did all women want to hurt him? With the number of ladies he was about to meet, he would have been better off in the crystal if that were the case.

“Luna, what’s wrong? What are you doing?!” Misty cried out, moving over by the priestess.

“Someone, *kill* him, we won’t get another chance!” the priestess shouted. She kept her trembling hands up, and the black-furred wolf remained pinned solidly to the wall, three feet off the floor. He writhed in pain as he was obviously being choked, his hands pushed by his sides. Luna was using the essence to hold him down as if with rope.

“I can’t do that! We don’t even know who he is!” Nita barked.

“That’s Mannus you idiots! Alps, how could you not have remembered!?” Luna cried. Nidaja whipped out her long, gleaming sword in an instant, putting the tip of the blade in front of the wolf’s heart. Harming him was not a long stretch for the general, particularly since she brought him right into the castle and was partly responsible for his intrusion.

“Give the order, Nita. If Luna’s telling the truth, we have been presented with the only chance we have.” Nidaja said. Alps gritted his teeth. It was all happening too fast for him to process. Mannus was the one he saved? That made no sense at all, unless this had been some kind of trap. Would Mannus have known that Alps was going to go into the crystal like that? That seemed hardly feasible.

“Do it, Nidaja. I am who she says I am.” The male pinned to the wall spoke out in a strained voice, being pressed harder by Luna. Alps looked up. Answers. He needed more answers, killing him without a thought was not right, but could he afford to stop them only to release this person if he was Mannus? If he was Mannus, a single Letai priestess could not hold him like that, could she? That dark wolf needed almost no effort to attack him when they were in the Nether. Breaking free of Luna would be hard, but this person did not even struggle. Alps looked up at the wolf. He only seemed... intensely unhappy. The slave sharpened his mind as he looked at the self-professed Mannus. He had to focus, a mere second could be all that was waiting between that moment and Nita’s order for the kill.

So Alps focused. He looked at the essence in the room. It was almost impossible to see a thing with the incredible amount of fiery rage boiling from Luna, but Mannus had no rage. His was no different than that black shroud hanging over the shoulders of the Asuna. That made no sense either.

“Wait, don’t!” Alps called, looking back to the queen, and over to Mannus.

“Don’t stop her, Alps. She is right to do this to me. I have hurt her in ways you cannot even imagine.” Mannus stated, his words heavy with regret. Alps could tell in his

essence that the regret was not likely a ruse. He was suffering far more than Luna's attack would account for. "She needs this. The world needs this. I did not believe you could actually pull me out, but you reminded me of someone I met before the end... before it all fell apart... And I wanted to follow you." He was plaintively explaining, but as he was doing so, he seemed to be begging to die. "If my tormented mind had one last thing to show me, I had to know that last part of myself I fear I kept buried too long. My regrets, my fears, I thought you were a mere manifestation of them, but you brought me here. I won't fight, I ask only for the mercy of swiftness in your judgment. It was destiny that she should be the one I faced at the end, since her loss finally stopped my madness." His final words were given with tears in his eyes. Alps looked at the scene unfolding, dumbfounded. He had played his meeting Mannus in his mind a few times in his travels, when he felt more and more that it would be an eventuality. It was never like this. He was actually trying to protect the guy.

"What do I do, Nita?" Nidaja asked, her sword wavering. She obviously did not want to act against Alps' wishes either, even if she disliked the guy even before finding out who he was.

"I... I don't know..." Nita said in shock. Alps could not blame her. He was the person she had feared and hated and been hurt by for her entire life, but he was just pulled from a Shadowfall. Alps narrowed his eyes. If Mannus had been in the crystal like he said, for so long that he was given to fantasies, who put him there, and why? Did he put himself there? If so, who controlled the Uruk? That was a question that shot through Alps hard. Who had the Amani and the Asuna actually been fighting?

"Alps, I am sorry..." Luna cried, tears streaming down her lovely white-furred cheeks. "You are so loving and sweet, you have no heart for this. Forgive that I must do this, but you don't know what that *thing* is! You don't know what he's done, and I want to spare you from remembering!" She held up her hand. Nita's slave felt the pressure in the room rise suddenly, his ears popping. "This is a monster, Alps, it does not deserve your beautiful forgiveness and understanding. He certainly didn't give it to anyone else!"

"Alps, move!" Nita shouted. The white wolf male gritted his teeth, and stood between the priestess and their enemy. What was he doing? What right did he have to interfere? If this really was Mannus, he took Luna's child away from her. He took her world away from her. He pushed her into oblivion to suffer the nightmare of her failure as a healer to restore her people. Could Alps really stop her from claiming justice? He asked himself this repeatedly in his mind as she cried, holding her hand up. It broke his heart to see her so distressed; sobbing as she was, but this was a mistake he didn't want her to have to live with. She finally lifted her hand suddenly, pointing up above Alps, to Mannus' face. The black-furred lupine spoke softly,

"It's okay, Alps. It might not be nice, but at least I'm not suffering forever with the memories of what I did. Luna is right to do this. She was right all along." The heavy-hearted male hung his head, and stated, "I am everything she said I am." Luna cried out her words in a barely intelligible sob,

*“Burlinarthukarnlinista ’tir!”* The room darkened suddenly, as if most of the light was pushed out. Alps felt a rise in nether energy. Luna was using a forbidden essence technique. She was no longer waiting for Nidaja. She was going to do it herself. Alps’ mind snapped back to absolute clarity. This was wrong. That was all he knew at that very moment. He shoved his hand into his side-pouch and drew it back out quickly. Just as he did, another bolt of lightning, this time black as pitch, ripped from Luna’s outstretched hand, but it did not make it to Mannus.

Alps held the shimmering green staff of Ressaia above his head, having used it to block the attack. He looked with severity at the priestess.

“He was what *you* will never be, Luna.” Alps was very solid in his words, his voice actually echoing, some after effect perhaps of all the essence in the room magnifying it. “You are not a heartless killer!” He held the staff up in front of him, between himself and the horrified-looking priestess. That attack was probably not something that could just be swatted down.

“No! Alps what are you doing, He’ll kill you!” she cried. The staff-wielding wolf looked back to Mannus, putting the weapon to his gut, pushing a bit.

“Where have you been the past several centuries, Mannus? Hide nothing. If you think you owe this priestess your life, you better fucking believe you owe her answers.” Despite the fact that he was saving this creature’s life, Alps was only committing himself to this to understand why this felt all wrong. When he was done, he knew he might well need to step out of the way and let the execution take place. All he wanted now was to understand what happened.

“I have been where you found me. Most of the time right on that rock, alone, where a monster like me belongs. Don’t stop her from doing this. She will hate you for it.” Mannus was still speaking in a very regretting tone. “You don’t need to do anything for me, you allowed me to face judgment. This is more than the Avatar would have given me. You offer me a far better end, and I face it willingly.” Alps narrowed his eyes. Luna looked up, her hand lowering as she spoke.

“That Avatar? Who is that?” she asked. Alps inhaled deeply. He was glad that Luna was starting to see what he did. Something was wrong here. Mannus answered, still hanging against the wall helplessly.

“He will be left when I am gone, the final song for this world, and my own doing.” The black-furred lupine spoke softer as tears rolled down his own muzzle. Regret. Deep, sorrowful regret. “This is my real crime upon all people. My reason to deserve every day for eternity what the priestess would do if you did not hold her back. He is the one who will be the end, not me, but it is by my foolishness that he exists.” Alps felt a cold chill run up his spine. He knew. Somehow he knew that Mannus spoke the truth. Something else was there, pushing the Amani and the Asuna to the brink of

oblivion.

“So you wish to die to pay for the crime of bringing him here. From the Nether, I suspect?” the slave asked, pushing his gut harder. Regretting it was not punishment enough for dooming their world to something they might not be able to fight. He was finding it harder to disagree with Luna that he was deserving of the sentence she would give him.

“What have you done, Mannus? I see it in your eyes. Death is not justice to you... You betrayed yourself just now...” Luna growled.

“Shit...” Mannus whined, looking away suddenly. Alps looked back to the priestess. She had seen him waver enough to see all that?

“You don’t want to die to pay for it; you want to die to *escape*. You are afraid of what you left in this world, so you move on to the next.” she stated coldly. Alps could tell by Mannus’ reaction that Luna hit a nerve with that. He looked back to Mannus.

“What is it? What is the Avatar? How do we fight it? Tell us!” Alps barked, thumping the essence-bound wolf in the tummy with the slightly heavier head of his staff. Alps did not hold it just so he could prod Mannus. He was keenly aware that for whatever reason the wolf’s attacks, and even Luna’s, did not work on the bearer of the staff. Holding the staff kept either from lashing out at the other.

“You don’t fight it! It’s beyond anything you can even comprehend, boy!” the black-furred wolf barked. “It’s beyond even a Culier Shadow!” Alps recoiled a little, remembering from the books and what Lyat said about them. They were monsters that destroyed people just by getting close to them. Alps growled deeply.

“Did you summon this from the Nether?” he asked.

“No, it started as a shadow. I realized that I had been releasing them, and was trying to destroy them. I failed, and I made a terrible mistake.” Mannus explained. Luna let the wolf slide down the wall, so that he could stand, but his hands were obviously still bound at his sides.

“What happened? What did you do?” the priestess asked, wiping her tears of rage out of her eyes. “How have you doomed us, Whale?” she asked, using his first name. Alps looked curiously back to her. She obviously saw the same value in this line of questioning he did. The slave felt better about interfering now. He didn’t want Luna to hate him.

“Culier Shadows thrive on strong emotions the way Letai do, but they long for suffering and fury and anger. Instead of just drawing upon it for the energy, they draw upon it like food, making them larger and stronger. I should explain a bit more as to ... everything that led up to this. Otherwise, none of this will make any sense.” he noted.

Misty padded toward the door.

“If we will be here a while I will get some additional guard so we are not so on edge.” She spoke in a marveling tone as she exited. Alps looked after her a bit. He had not considered it, but despite the darkness of things that had transpired, this was a fairy tale to someone like the councilor. She was talking with someone who claimed to be Vhale Mannus himself, and a powerful High Priestess of legend who had just tried to kill him with power unlike anything that the well-read scholar had even heard of. This was a red-letter day to Misty. Alps looked back to Mannus as Nidaja approached him, and pulled his hands back, holding him in place. Nidaja had said almost nothing since returning, but she was the symbol of order for the castle. It was right for her to restrain the prisoner.

“I won’t run. There’s nowhere for me to go.” He spoke in a very depressed fashion. Alps frowned. He likely needed as much protection from himself as he did from anyone else. Misty ultimately returned with two chairs, and with some additional guard. They had just returned from their patrol to find out Alps’ crystal had started brightly glowing, so they were out of breath from running all the way from the city of Diera below the castle. Uri and Misha threw their arms around the slave and peppered him with little kisses.

“Popular guy.” Mannus stated. Nidaja gave a severe look to him, so that he knew to hold his tongue.

“Who’s the new guy?” Uri asked, pointing at him.

“Vhale Mannus.” Luna stated. “...And no, I am not joking.”

Alps wondered if Luna had meant to just watch the reaction of the two guards when that was stated. The two girls looked horrified at the restrained male, and then back to Luna.

“You are joking.” Uri said.

“And here I said I was not.” Luna stated.

“It’s true.” Alps said softly.

“This can’t be Mannus, no one’s killing him.” Misha stated matter-of-factly.

“We’ll get to that, it’s story-time now.” Misty said, placing one chair in front of Nita, who sat down demurely. The councilor placed the other chair in front of her. Mannus was pulled by Nidaja to the chair, and Uri and Misha bound him to it with leather restraints the guards typically carried, not always for prisoners.

“Any attempt to attack or get free will result in immediate decapitation.” Uri said,



hefting her hand-axe in indication.

“We will be fine.” Luna said, standing behind Nita. She gazed curiously at the very familiar but unexpected captive. The day had obviously gone far from what she expected, so Alps was sure even her mind was reeling from it. She had to be far more alarmed than he was at this development, as she had fought this person and lost everything, and now it seemed he was completely in her power. “Now that you are more comfy, you may talk. Tell us everything.”

Mannus cleared his throat, not in a symbolic gesture to draw attention, but because Luna had been choking him heavily when he was mashed against the wall with whatever essence ability she was using to hold him there. He looked around the room to see who would hear his story, perhaps the first time he was able to actually tell it. He looked back to Alps, however, and gazed at him for a very long time.

“Speak.” Nidaja said, kicking the chair.

“I am sorry, yes.” Mannus stated, shifting a bit, and sighing. “First, I will start by saying, regardless of my story, I still expect my judgment to be carried out as I deserve. What you will hear is not a plea for my life or for understanding. I merely agree with Alps... that for what you have endured, and what you still face, you deserve the answers he demands. You all deserve to know what I have done, and why it happened.”

“Damn right we do.” Luna growled. “Don’t drag it out, let’s hear it.” Alps nodded to the priestess. He agreed, the more they knew the better, but there was no need to drag out the story.

“Alright, I will try to be concise...” Mannus said, inhaling deeply, before speaking again, “When I was a student and apprentice in the Library of Gize, they found that I had a strong influence in all three schools of Essence manipulation. This was highly unusual for males, so they provided me with the education of a priestess.”

“We already know this part.” Luna said impatiently.

“I don’t.” Nita interjected.

“None of us do.” Misty stated, obviously not wanting to miss a single chance at new knowledge of what started the war.

“Really? No one thought to write that stuff down?” Luna asked.

“It’s been hundreds of years, Priestess. Much of that info was lost.” Alps stated. Luna looked back at Alps, her expression softening suddenly. She murmured to him,

“You don’t have to call me Priestess, you know. You don’t have to be so formal with me.” She seemed to warm quickly, but then shook her head. “... Anyway,

continue, Vhale..." The slave looked at Luna curiously. What was that about?

"... As I was saying..." Vhale resumed, "I was given a very good education into the use of the essence, but I was young and adventurous, as male youths are given to be, and I immediately took an interest in the only rules there were to break." Luna nodded in understanding. "While I excelled at crystal-creation and imbuing abilities to them, I felt limited by the amount of energy I was restricted to using. I thought that I could make the world better in every possible way if I could just make more powerful essence using devices. I wanted everyone to know who I was, and my name to mean success and discovery! I knew I could get in trouble for it, but I wanted to find out more about the Nether, and the essence therein. It seemed impossible that there was no way at all to use it safely, and the things we could do with that much power were seemingly without limits. I had to learn more, so I began, not drawing it, but pushing my own essence into it. I had to see how it reacted and what I could learn about it. At least if it was impossible to control, like everyone had said, I would know this for sure, and not just think that was something they said to keep anyone from becoming too powerful."

"Even before you, there were rumors to that effect." Luna stated. "You were certainly not alone in thinking there was a conspiracy of the elders to prevent others from gaining more power than them just because they had the rare ability to use the nether essence, but the appearance of tragedy in places where nether essence had been used was very well documented."

"Indeed, but those who bought into the rumors, like I did, thought that such events could just as easily be fabricated, or even caused by those who wished to retain their power over that region." Mannus interjected, brushing his errant tendril of hair from in front of his eyes again, which he seemed to do when he was thoughtful. "So I thought this was the case, and I pushed my essence into the darkness, and I found something there..." He shifted a bit, seeming uncomfortable. "I found a voice. And the voice was that of a man who said he was an ancestor who took the very power I was seeking, and in doing so left his will imprinted on the essence to deliver a warning, because he would be the only one who could deliver it." Mannus paused a moment, seeming to think of how to explain it. Misty cut in gently,

"What was the warning?" Alps looked at the councilor, who seemed more engrossed than he had ever seen her. He knew she probably felt guilty about it, but this was likely the best day in her memorable life.

"The Letai were going to bring about the end. Their greed for control and power was creating an imbalance in the essence of the world that invited what he called 'The Great Backlash' that would occur eventually over the whole world, and that might possibly kill every living thing in the world." Vhale leaned back and looked back over to Luna, letting her speak, as he seemed to know she would.

"You said that was your own theory, you never said you heard it from weird voices in the darkness, Vhale." The priestess seemed justifiably cross.

“Yeah, I kind of imagined I would not get much support for my cause if I said I was hearing voices.” Mannus admitted. Alps nodded. That was a wise assumption.

“What was supposed to cause The Great backlash?” Nita asked. “Why were the Letai supposed to be responsible? You seem bright, so I doubt you would have believed such a story without some kind of evidence.”

“The lady is very astute.” Mannus leaned forward again, nodding. “You are?” he asked.

“Queen Nita Razelle.” Nidaja answered for her.

“Royalty, oh I did crash a serious coming home party.” Mannus marveled. “This wolf keeps important company.”

“Continue your story.” Alps said, cutting him off. The black furred lupine resumed.

“Sorry, where was I? Oh yes, the proof. The voice of my ancestor offered up the very same evidence that forbade the use of nether essence. Monsters attacked where the imbalance was already strong, he said. Disasters happened too, large unexplained fires, rocks falling from the sky, floods and famine; these were all caused by the essence trying to balance itself.” Misty cut in again.

“But what was supposed to cause the imbalance? How were the Letai responsible?” she asked.

“The Letai draw their power by easing suffering and bringing happiness and contentment. Obviously they can use other emotions, but these are the socially acceptable ones that made people happy to have the Letai around.” Whale looked to Alps. “Some seem rather adept at being wanted around, as you already know. They made some towns nearly paradises, vacation lands for those who could afford their services in these beautiful temples and gardens. Strife happened, but it was harder and harder to come by, and usually quite localized. The voice told me that the essence was out of balance, and that a certain amount of suffering should be allowed. Anger, sorrow, strife, all these things should happen naturally, or the natural order of things would cause catastrophe. I was warned that it was already so bad that we might only have a couple of years before the planet was simply doomed no matter what.” It was Luna’s turn to cut in. Misty, Nidaja, Uri, Nita, and Misha all hung on every word. This was the most important conversation in the past several centuries, they were quite sure.

“He went to the Council of Elders and tried to sell them on this story, telling them that they had to cease all essence-gathering and allow the natural order to return.” She stated, knowing very well this part of the story. “The idea that the Letai were causing anyone harm, when their very intent was to cause peace and happiness to all around them

was utterly foolish. The idea was laughable, and not only was Vhale denied his request that the positive activities of the Letai stop, but he was revoked of access to the library, and asked to cease his investigations into the nether immediately. To use it was punishable by exile, and violation of exile punishable by death. Being alone is the worst punishment upon a Letai, so exile was usually seen as worse than a death sentence. He was given only one warning.” Luna said with finality.

“As you can guess,” resumed Vhale, “I didn’t think much of the warning, and in fact, thought it was the best proof of a conspiracy by the Council of Elders who were in fear of losing their station and their control of Amani. I continued to talk with the voice and contact the Nether and the warnings grew darker. Finally, I decided that I had to act against the Letai, but I did not have enough time to make them stop by trying to sway opinion to my side or affect slow change. I had to do something drastic to save the world.” Alps listened to this explanation in near shock. Mannus was not a dark enemy of the people, he was trying to save them. That was the farthest thing from what the slave had expected. Luna did not seem to be trying to correct them either, so it was apparent that the Letai knew what Mannus was saying, and even if they did not believe him, he was still telling the truth about what *he* felt was going on. There was a chance the world was in danger, and he was trying to stop that disaster from occurring. The wolf began to relax his feeling that Mannus still deserved to die.

“What did you do? What happened next?” Misty asked, her eyes round and looking oddly very youthful as she adjusted her spectacles. The youthful affect was mostly due to the fact that she had seated herself on the floor like a child listening to a fireside story.

“Yes, this is the less heroic part of it all.” Luna stated with an acidic tone. Mannus nodded to her.

“Indeed. This is where my fall began.” His words verified Luna, rather than challenging her. Alps felt a very cold chill run through him, as if it had only just dawned on him that this really was Mannus, sitting right there before him. This was the one that he had sworn he would do everything in his power to keep away from those he loved, and now, here they all were, just listening to him talk, not even seeming fearful. The double doors of the meeting room swung open, and everyone looked up.

Ellis the fox, still adorned in the black and silver robes that the slave always saw her in, padded in quietly. Everyone watched her as the room went dead quiet. She made a beeline over to where Mannus was sitting. Alps looked back to Vhale and saw an expression of stunned silence on his face. Of course he would recognize her, Alps thought. Just like Luna, he had sent the vixen into the Shadowfall, and a fox would probably be harder for him to forget. He didn’t move at all as she walked over to him. She stood between the queen and Mannus, perhaps a little impolitely, and she leaned forward, her black vulpine nose nearly against Mannus’ own.

The quiet was chilling, and the slave found himself wondering if the chill he felt

before was a result of her, and not of his just being fully aware this was Mannus. It felt just as cold as she looked hard into the frozen black wolf's crimson eyes. She then leaned back rather abruptly and pulled open the front of Mannus' robes, quite similar to her own, baring his chest. There was a glittering silver chain around his neck, thin and elegant. At the end of the chain was a small silver key with a crystal inlay. Whale didn't even seem willing to breathe as he looked into the fox's eyes, never looking away. She did not look away either, she just curled her fingers around the little key, and yanked, breaking the chain. No one said a word, seeming stupefied by her blunt and unusual actions. She then just turned and walked out with a calm sense of casual duty, taking the key with her. All noses followed her direction as she left, and slammed the double doors behind her, seemingly without even touching them.

"Umm..." murmured Nita.

"What the hell?" Uri asked.

"I'm not dead." Mannus said softly with a blank expression. "Unbelievable."

"What... did she take from you? What was that key?" Luna asked. The black-furred male seemed to snap out of it.

"The key... The key! Oh that was hers. When I fought her, I pulled it off of her. I had forgotten who I even got that thing from..." He marveled at this a moment, but everyone else just seemed utterly perplexed. Alps, however, was just glad that everyone saw her. He was sure everyone saw her when she first arrived, but he had begun at times to wonder if she was just in his head.

"You fought her?" Misty asked.

"I fought Luna too." Mannus stated calmly. "But yet, here she is. It would seem Alps here has been a busy fellow." He indicated the wolf in question. Alps looked away a little, always hating to be the focus of conversation. Luna nodded to Whale.

"He's an admirable creature, yes, but now that our vulpine lady friend has retrieved her belongings let's get back to your less than admirable deeds, shall we?" Her words were stern and calm. She wanted to keep everyone focused.

"I apologize." Whale responded, and continued. "I decided that the only way that I could succeed was to use the Nether essence myself. The voice told me how to create an unusual crystal that could receive my will, and move material around it when made properly... I could make clay figures dance and move about, and ultimately, I made them carry weapons and defend me. I called these golems Uruk. When the Council of Elders finally caught wind of what I was doing, I held a large town under my control with about fifty of these Uruk soldiers, and the population of this city was helping me build more of these golems every day under penalty of death. My intention was to capture several towns and force the Letai out, leaving the population to suffer as normal. This would at

least slow the progression of the imbalance. I would not kill more than was necessary to keep order, and I would just let the natural state of things take its course. The voice told me that one town was not enough, so I took two. Then two towns were not enough, so I took three. I took a larger city finally in my attempt to buy more time to convince the Letai that they were a threat to the world's very existence."

Alps listened in horror at this tale. The peaceful cities were being captured and forced into slavery to balance the essence. This was a very big change from someone who just wanted to help. It was an attack on a large scale. He could not imagine the number of people who likely died just to keep Mannus from taking a city, but if Vhale had intended suffering, he certainly found it if he had to destroy so many lives to achieve this end. The slave spoke up softly.

"You say that you did this for the good of the people, but you would have had to destroy so many lives just to overthrow a single town, did you believe this dark voice so much back then that you felt this was really necessary?" Vhale looked back at the wolf and shook his head.

"Part of me always wanted to think he was wrong about what would happen, but the actions of the elders seemed so suspicious to me. They were not even willing to help me research. They wrote off what I said not as just a possible mistake, but as a criminal act. I felt they did not take it seriously, and the matter was serious. I know now, of course, that I was wrong to listen to the voice, and that my deeds were a mistake, but do not pity me too much, Alps. I am still at fault for what happened. It was still my doing." The white male nodded quietly, but still felt sorry quite a bit for Vhale. If he did believe back then that he was saving everyone, the lives he took, the choices he made back then, could not have been easy.

"Please continue." Nita said, leaning forward, paying very close attention. The prisoner did as requested.

"I thought for sure after taking a city I had enough suffering to allow me some time to work, but the voice told me that the Letai were only stepping up their efforts elsewhere to counteract me, trying to prevent those in other cities from defying their will and panicking and demanding that I be taken seriously by only making lives more pleasant where they were, giving a false sense of security, and a false sense of how powerful they were in their ability to stop me. They were proud and foolish, and that would only cause the world to suffer its end faster." Mannus wrung his hands expressing the added stress he was given. Nidaja took a turn to ask a question.

"If taking over cities was not enough to stop it from happening, then the problem would seem to be the Letai themselves. So is that when you began exterminating them instead?" Alps gritted his teeth at how brash the question Nidaja asked was but the general was plainly aware of the history involved at least to that point. The Letai were wiped out directly. Mannus seemed to falter a bit, lowering his head. He spoke again.

“I asked the voice what it was I should do. How could I slow the end, how could I make them see? The voice in the dark told me that I had to make the Letai fewer in numbers, and make those that remained suffer terribly. The suffering of those with their level of power would have a dramatic effect to stop the end from coming. To make the Letai suffer is not a simple task though. They are given to ease of comfort and find joy in one another beyond any suffering I could exact with mere stress or injuries. My only option would be to destroy them. This did not give me much joy, but it did comfort me in that I suddenly felt that I no longer had to try to take every city and kill innocent people who were only defending their homes. The problem was, the Letai were very powerful. In all the fighting my soldiers and I had done, only a few had actually fallen. It was unlikely I could fight them all at once, so I had to deal with them one or two at a time, so I held back my advance, I even abandoned a couple towns, and moved east into Asuna territory. The Asuna at the time were very tribal, and had no cohesion. A few Letai were among them only to bring peace and healing to the towns and villages that wanted it, but I overtook those towns.” Mannus stopped a moment. Luna took the time to speak again.

“Because you were retreating, the Letai believed that you felt your mission done. I recall those days of relative peace in my youth. But it was not to last. You were learning something new about your abilities while you enslaved the Asuna.” The lupine priestess prodded the fallen Letai to keep the story going.

“I discovered a property of the Nether essence... I found out that the Nether was a place, and it was different from where we live, but that it could be opened up when one used a lot of Nether energy. Unfortunately, when one did that, it released monsters into our world, some of which even I could not destroy. It was during this time that I accidentally released the first of the Culier Shadows. I wanted to dispose of them, because I felt that regardless of how well I did saving the world from destruction, those creatures could undo whatever remained. I knew that the creatures seemed to be made entirely of things like fear, despair, loathing... and this intrigued me. During the time that I was trying to figure out how to kill a Culier Shadow, I found that these creatures created a pattern in the essence when they came through. I imbued a crystal with a similar pattern to see if I could mimic the energy and force that energy onto someone else, and mirror their essence with nether essence. I would, in a sense, be controlling what they felt. In this way, I could make a Letai suffer as long as I wanted.”

“The first Shadowfall crystals.” Uri interrupted. Luna shushed her. She shushed.

“Right. I didn’t know what I was really doing, but when I used the crystal on one of my Asuna slaves, he was just... gone.” Mannus continued. “At first I thought I had created a terrible weapon that just vaporized anyone I used it on, and I was fearful of such a thing, but I began to feel energy emanating from the crystal. I had not charged it with more energy, so I was uncertain of where the energy was coming from. I tried using one again, this time measuring and carefully examining the life essence of the hyena I used it on.”

“That’s utterly awful, those poor people.” Nidaja murmured sadly.

“Yes, my apologies.” Vhale said, making Nidaja wrinkle her nose. What was done was done, so Alps understood, but Nidaja was not wavering on her irritation.

“Continue.” Luna and Alps stated simultaneously. Mannus resumed.

“I measured his essence, and found out that the essence emanating from the crystal was still his. I pushed my essence into the nether and found that the hyena was still in there, but from what I could tell, he was running from his fears in that place, which seemed to have been created by his mind. I wanted to get the hyenas out of the crystal so I could find out exactly what was in there, but try as I might, I could find no conceivable way to reverse the process that sent them there. I studied and learned a great deal about what it did, and knew with certainty that it was as permanent as anything could be, but breaking the crystal from outside would not release the person, and breaking it from inside was impossible. That was by far the worst turning point for me. I realized then that someone confined to that crystal would suffer forever. Even the Letai.” Luna sighed and shook her head as he said this, knowing what that turning point meant for her people.

“So you began using the Shadowfall, even knowing that the effect would be permanent on the Letai. They would suffer forever, without end?” Alps asked incredulously. He was not so shocked that Mannus did it as he was that the wolf could even make a choice like that. Vhale nodded at the white wolf.

“It is one of the things that I regret the most. One of them. There was one event that finally ended it, but I will get there soon. Luna could tell you pretty much everything that occurred after this point. I began advancing, taking towns again, not to make the people suffer, but to provoke the Letai. I already had more than four thousand Uruk soldiers and the Asuna made more all the time, so my supply was unlimited, more or less. The Asuna would farm the materials needed and construct the Uruk from molds, and I would spend a few hours imbuing the crystals that I had created. But the first few towns I took did not provoke a response. I had to make the Letai stand in force before I used my new weapon. I had to get as many as I could as quickly as I could.”

“You killed everybody.” Luna stated.

“Not everybody. I let mothers and their children leave.” Mannus responded.

“They would have rather died.” the priestess barked angrily. “You killed everyone but them and burned their towns to the ground. You sent them just to convey the message of what you were doing to make the Letai move against you. To finally stop you.” Mannus nodded at this, and he sadly explained,

“Yes. I did this. I wanted the war to end quickly. That is what it was at this point. I was convinced this was what I had to do to save the world. I say it again, Luna,



everyone... I do not make excuses nor beg forgiveness. In fact, what I have done is so far beyond forgiveness I could not even dream of it. So don't think I am making light of what I have done by telling you this now. I asked to be killed for a reason, and it was not merely to run away. I do deserve the sentence I know I will get, but I am appreciative of the chance to at least give answers as to why. My mistakes can never be repeated, if there is any hope for the world at all."

"So the Letai amassed. I was there that day." Luna said sadly, "The Council of Elders brought twelve hundred of us, believing that we would be against the entire Uruk army, and that these numbers would be sufficient to destroy your army, and we could then hunt you down to the ends of the world if we needed to, liberating the Asuna, and ending your reign of terror once and for all. We went into battle with heavy hearts. The Letai were not made for war. We had only ever fought to protect before. We saw as we advanced that quite a few of the Uruk had staves with crystals affixed to the ends of them. We did not think much of it, feeling that these were likely to use essence attacks upon us, but many of us could defend against such things, so the attack continued." Luna gritted her teeth in memory of this terrible event.

"Then, when I saw that there were almost all of the Letai on the battlefield, I gave the command for the Shadowfall Uruk to use their staves." Mannus stated, clarifying the timing of his plan. Luna spoke again.

"I was being held back near the Elders. As one of their most powerful healers, my main duty would come after the battle, hopefully in only limited capacity. So I watched from a lot farther back, and it was for that reason that I was spared the horror, if only for a time, that the others immediately found. As we viewed the battle from the ridge, we started seeing our friends just... vanish. One at a time, and then in clusters, and soon, there was just a crushing number of Uruk fighting against very few Letai. Those few that didn't simply vanish were overwhelmed and killed. It was a slaughter. The Elders and I retreated. There were but a few active Letai, less than two hundred, left after that terrible, terrible day. We tried to hold on in a few locations, and then many went into hiding, some among the Asuna. We even tried mixing blood with the Asuna, which was against the rules because of their violent tendencies, but anything to keep our bloodline alive and give the world a chance against the Uruk and against Mannus. Mannus was clever and managed to find all the Letai where they hid. He had the resources and the time. Everything was against us, and we failed. I shamefully went into hiding because my skills were not well suited to hiding, but soon, with a child of my own, I could no longer afford to watch the world slip away. I learned the worst offensive essence techniques anyone knew, my intent to attack Mannus directly. I would lure him out to take me down." Luna growled.

"She lured me out by obliterating easily a thousand Uruk over a few weeks time, liberating a few towns and bringing a lot of pressure on my eastern border. She was very valiant and effective, and her ability to command people and make choices was second to none." Mannus complimented. It did not seem to appease the again smoldering Luna.

“I stood and fought, and right before my eyes my own child was taken from me by this monster. I was so distraught I tried to wipe him out with a single attack, but he had his crystal ready, and off I went... into a scorched land where try as I might, nothing would grow. I would try to heal the ruined land, and it would go back to being ash and broken stone. I believed, for so long, that I merely woke up in a world that had lost all life, and even when it finally dawned on me what had actually happened, that I was in the Shadowfall, I knew that without the Letai, the world would fall to ruin, just as I was seeing. It was no different from reality to me. I stayed in there for 700 years, Vhale, and then the most unexpected person of all came to rescue me. And now, he’s rescued you for some strange and ironic reason. So, tell us Vhale... how came you to be Shadowfallen yourself? What stopped you, and why didn’t your terrible war stop with you? Do the Uruk fight on without you? Did they not need you to control them after all?” Mannus’ head was down, and tears again marked his dark muzzle. He struggled to get control of himself, before speaking again.

“You were the last Shadowfall cast in that terrible war, Luna.” Mannus looked into her eyes sorrowfully. “And yet, it was not because you were the last of the Letai, it was because of my taking your child. After that day, I was preoccupied with that act. It was by far the most terrible thing I had ever intentionally done. I know the Uruk had occasionally killed children, I could command them, but I did not guide their every move, and this saddened me greatly, but never had I looked into the eyes of a child and destroyed him.”

“You didn’t destroy him, you cast Shadowfall upon him. You condemned a child of seven seasons to eternal suffering.” Luna’s words were dark, and so heavy that Nita and Misty both began to cry. Mannus was already crying, and Uri, Misha, and Nidaja looked at the wretch with utterly murderous intent.

“I told you it was bad.” Mannus looked away. “But that was it. That was what broke the cycle. Too high a sacrifice for anyone, but that’s what it took. After that day, I did not move my armies. I did not seek out one more Letai. I did not reach out and speak with the voice. I began to try to repair the damage. There were a few Letai remaining. Maybe twenty or so. The world would heal. I decided to seek out and destroy the Culier Shadows. This is where my end comes to pass.” He stated.

“About forever too late.” Luna growled, bristling. “I know one thing you do not, and it’s the only reason you are telling us this story, but proceed.” She brought a hand to Alps’ shoulder, rocking the slave a bit to pull him back to her bosom, giving him a hug. The slave was near tears, in shock that Vhale could do such a thing himself, and Luna comforted him. He appreciated it.

“When trying to deal with the Culier Shadows, I decided to attempt to use my ultimate technique. I could send them away into a world where they would have all the suffering they wanted and they would be no harm to anyone. I attempted to use the Shadowfall upon one of them. This was a terrible, terrible mistake. It failed, and I retreated, the thing consuming the crystal I had created just for it, and something

incredible, and utterly... unthinkable happened to the Shadow.” Mannus winced a bit, this memory painful. Alps rumbled softly,

“Keep going. We need to know this.” His voice was softer now, feeling a bit better thanks to the priestess.

“Very well, Alps. It changed. It changed right before my eyes, that horrible abomination. It became an image of me, standing right before me, its eyes glowing red, its hands wrapped in crackling dark energy. And he spoke. It said, ‘This took so long, but here I am at last.’... and I knew the voice immediately.” Mannus stated in a cold, wavering tone, near tears again.

“The voice from the essence.” Nita stated flatly.

“The same. That very moment, I realized that all I had done was for him, and his warnings had been a ruse to bring the parts together for this very moment. I attacked him, but essence attacks were meaningless to it. It didn’t even seem to notice as it looked at its hands and wiggled its toes and stroked its new and fluffy tail. It was delighted at its existence. Finally, it addressed me. It told me that it needed three things to come into existence. It needed a world filled with a very special kind of suffering. I had created that, making a world of war and loss where even children fantasized about slitting my throat. That is a very powerful kind of hate and violation of innocence and beauty.” Alps cringed at that thought, but could understand entirely. It was horrible, but it was true. Mannus had indeed created such a world. “Second, he needed a body that could draw power from suffering alone. The Culier Shadows were that, to be sure. He made sure to push one through any time I opened a wide enough hole into the Nether. The final thing he needed was a door to be opened wide enough for him to get through. Part of his plan had been failing. He had not realized I would create the Shadowfall Crystals. As a result, I no longer opened doors into the Nether like I had done before. I didn’t need to. However, when the Culier Shadow consumed the Shadowfall Crystal, it released all the Nether Essence into itself. He could feel it, and commanded the Shadow to do something simple with the energy. Just open a little hole into the Nether. That was all it took. And there he stood before me. He was the voice in the dark, my foolishness and my shame, my failure to this whole unfortunate world. He is an avatar of all the pain, suffering, and fear in this world. That is why I call him the Avatar.”

“So wait...” Alps stated softly, seeming to shake the gloom off of him. It was pretty easy to do with Luna holding him as she was, “If the dark voice needs suffering as one of the three elements, doesn’t he have to keep people alive in the world to generate that effect?” Nita looked proudly to her lover as he mentioned something that did give her some hope. That was finally a reason why they had not been merely wiped out. He could not do it if he needed that suffering. The occasional raids to thin them out and keep them from getting too aggressive finally made some sense. Whale inhaled deeply, and shook his head. The black wolf spoke sadly,

“You are right in that, he needs suffering. It’s his food, and his power would

wane over time if he didn't have enough, but I doomed the world completely. You see, he likes the flavor of the living a great deal in how they suffer, and draws upon it happily, playing with their lives like toys and pushing them to the brink as he will, but he doesn't need them. I left almost a hundred Shadowfall Crystals across the land, and each one slowly emanates with the suffering of those trapped in the Shadowfall. They will do so forever. He doesn't know how long those crystals last, so he does not take the chance needlessly, I suppose, but if he felt his existence might be threatened, he might well take the chance to subsist on those crystals for a while, and wipe out nearly every single living being in the world. He would not have to kill them all, but the ones who are left certainly would not be willing to defy him again." Alps sighed softly, slumping a bit against Luna.

"So that is it? This darkness you unleashed is unaffected by the essence, so essentially unkillable in any fashion that we know of, and it allows life only to cause it to suffer, willing to take it away on a whim? That is what you have given us to enjoy?" Luna asked.

"Correct. You may kill me now." Vhale responded matter-of-factly.

"No." Luna stated.

"What?" Nita asked.

"I wanna do it." Uri interjected.

"I have seniority." Misha barked.

"Death is an escape to you. I won't kill you." Luna growled.

"Then allow someone else to do it." Mannus groaned, "I would not be an asset to those who remain in this wretched world. I would just be a burden. I would be eating someone else's food in a prison cell someplace. I have no intention of using the essence, Nether or otherwise, ever again, but I wish more for an end to my existence. I have had more than six centuries to enjoy my guilt."

"I say we let Alps put him back in a crystal. Forever is a nice time for him to think about what he did." Nidaja growled.

"He wouldn't do that." Nita asked before Alps could say exactly the same thing. The slave had his own reason, however. He would not allow the Avatar to have one extra crystal to draw energy from.

"Luna, you are more aware than any of us what has been done, and what should be done from here." The queen stated softly, looking at Alps and Luna both. "I will allow you to make the determination. What shall be done?" Luna seemed to think a bit, looking at Alps more than Mannus. The slave lowered his ears, feeling like she was looking to him for some manner of guidance, and he felt he was entirely out of place to

offer anything of the sort. She finally spoke, her words gentle and soothing and calm, as Alps remembered them so fondly.

“Vhale Mannus... We will detain you for the time being under careful restraint of unconsciousness, as I fear your ability to harm yourself more than I fear your attempt to escape or harm others at this point. You will be unable to use the essence as you will be kept asleep by herbal extract. During this time, those in this room will be enjoying a meal, as a few of us spent way too long without a meal searching for you. During this time, I will be explaining something very, very important to those who have been kept absent from the queen for too long. It is something Alps deserves to know, and will allow him to understand his role in this with greater clarity. Once these matters have been explained, I will let Alps himself be the one to determine your fate. I do not know what choice he will make, and given the weight of what I must tell him, he does not know either. But he will decide, and all will be bound to his decision in this matter. Do you understand?” she asked solidly. Mannus lowered his head, and nodded, looking down at his feet.

“Alright... Very well, I am in agreement if you feel that is the wisest course, Priestess Luna. I apologize to all who live and have ever lived for what I have done, but cannot ask forgiveness. I only offer my condolences. I await your herbal extract and will not struggle. I agree that everyone will be more comfortable if I am not awake.” He stated. Luna leaned closer to Vhale and whispered,

“The extract is not used to make you unconscious, only keep you there...” and with that, she leaned back, slipped a leather-wrapped cudgel from the silky folds of her robes, and then brought it down hard on the back of the black wolf’s head. Alps winced hard, and everyone else equally cringed. There was an awkward silence as Luna left the room to prepare the herbs. Finally, Nidaja spoke.

“Why was she carrying that around?”

**Sirius, Book III**  
*The Essence*

*Comments or Questions?*

Contact Alps: [sarsis@gmail.com](mailto:sarsis@gmail.com)

Or just drop a note at: <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/sarsis/>

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**Chapter 18**

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As the reality of the situation fully sank into Alps tired mind, he found himself with less and less of an appetite. Cleaned, uniformed, neat and tidy he sat at the table as others gathered there in a dining hall. He'd been absent from this hall for a couple months due to his travels, but it still felt welcome and cozy. Nita sat to his left, at the head of the table, already laying out her napkin and preparing for a meal she seemed a lot more interested in than he was. Misty sat across from Alps, and to his side sat Nidaja, then Misha, then Uri. Beside Misty were Luna and Ceriss. The wolf had not seen Ceriss since he returned, so he was glad to see that she was still faring well.

They were all assembled for a meal and Alps guessed for a meeting to discuss what should be done with Mannus. The matter of Vhale weighed heavily on the slave's mind. Aside from that, the things Alps had done in the past few weeks had caused a lot of trouble for his lover, he was sure.

First, Alps brought the Asuna to the royal house, creating a chance that the general public might panic over the thought that the Asuna might be ready to attack the city of Diera. This brought Nita matters to fret about. Then, he had released the enemy that everyone thought the Amanian Empire had been fighting a losing battle with for centuries. The danger that Alps brought upon his lovers and friends in doing this was extreme and the slave felt terrible for his folly. His queen certainly had every reason to stress about every one of his actions. However, things only got increasingly complicated from there.

After releasing Mannus, they found out that the former head of the dark armies had acted in terrible error, and unleashed a terror upon them that they might have no way to defeat, even if they freed an army of Letai. Essence energy would not be enough to stop it, as it was essentially the same as a Culier Shadow except with immense intelligence and a motive for making the Amanian and Asuna people suffer.

To top all these matters off, the High Priestess had assigned Alps the task of coming up with a decision for how best to deal with Vhale himself. She apparently would do this once she had provided the white-furred male with what she thought might be very pertinent information. Alps felt that he still was not the right one to make that kind of decision. However, Luna was sure to have some good and valid reason for making him choose. He thought of these complex matters even as servants brought bread and butter to prepare for the meal to come. Luna finally stood up and tapped a knife on a crystal goblet to get the attention of those murmuring and breaking bread together at the table. She spoke in her usual intelligent, feathery, doting tone.

“Thank you everyone for coming to this meeting and meal. I know matters are dire and food may not be on everyone’s troubled minds, but I remind you all that little has changed from a year ago that has not only made us stronger and better prepared to face whatever tomorrow has in store for us but has also increased our chances of gaining at least some semblance of defense to the borders we already tentatively have. Do not sicken yourself with worry, it will change none of these realities today.” Several of the sets of eyes looking at the priestess seemed to have a bit of doubt in her optimism, but Alps could certainly understand.

The door to the dining hall creaked open softly at that point, and the graceful Ellis sauntered in noiselessly, taking a seat all the way down the table, facing Nita. It was an esteemed spot usually occupied by Nidaja, but she preferred to sit close to Alps on this day. Everyone looked at the vixen as she reached over to obtain some bread for herself. She did not say a word, and seemed hardly aware that it was more serious than a typical meal in her own home. Ellis took a bite as everyone watched awkwardly. She looked back at everyone with her wide, silver, haunting eyes. The vixen quietly swallowed, and had a sip of water with a wedge of citrus. The silence continued, as if someone might speak up and ask the uninvited addition to the table what she thought she was doing. She finally spoke, just as it seemed someone would have to say something.

“Well prepared, honeyed butter, quite sweet.” The fox seemed to speak only to solidify the fact that she didn’t care if this was a meeting, she was going to enjoy a meal with everyone, so they might as well just go on with it. Alps could not argue. The wolf was fairly sure she’d know any secret discussions held here even if the fox had not been noticed at the meeting. The awkward pause did not last too much longer. Luna watched the lady fox a moment, and then continued.

“In the past few months, the world has changed for each of us in a very dramatic way, and yet, most of the world is unaware that anything is different, and life goes on all around the empire in spite of these new truths. We learned that the Shadowfall is not a permanent concept, and that there is a way out, even if it took centuries to find it. We know this potential freedom and the power it requires pose their own perils and fearful consequences. We learned that the Letai can be brought back from the extinction that the darkness forced upon us. We learned that the enemy of the Letai, once a Letai himself, lives still, having been rooted to a crystal just like all of his kin. Even as we learn this, however, we find that he is apparently remorseful and does not intend to continue to wage war with the world.” Ceriss nodded at this, still seeming a bit stunned and quiet. Luna had likely brought her up to speed while Alps and the others bathed and tidied for supper.

“If we are to believe a word he says.” Uri said, thumping a fist on the table. Nita looked cautiously at the invited guard. It was poor form to interrupt the meeting’s host, and that was Luna.

“I think he speaks truth. Or at least, some truth.” Nita said, perhaps more to calm Uri than to provide insightful opinion.

“Why do you think that?” Misha asked, seeming doubtful as well.

“He has placed himself in a position of being utterly powerless. He’s unconscious, and he is among people who have every reason to want him dead. You or I have only a grudge against this... Avatar... But Luna and Alps and Ceriss have almost seven centuries of anger that he knows he is subject to. I saw the look in his eyes. He truly expected the priestess to kill him. And at the moment, I think he hopes she still will. He brought ruin to a world that he seems to have genuinely thought he was protecting. Luna can confirm the story, at least, up to his reasoning for attacking the Letai in the first place, and if the voice in the darkness is now the Avatar, the motives match up. This creature requires suffering to exist, and it knows very well how to farm it.”

“Again, that is if everything he says is true.” The black-furred lady guard retorted. “I do not wish to take everything he says at face value. I also very adamantly think he should die, mistake or not. Countless graves are filled with both Asuna and Amani and that is by his hand, misguided or not.”

“I can understand that.” Luna stated calmly. “His actions have brought unbelievable suffering on everyone. But now is not a time for fuming and fangbaring. Now is a time for reason, and moreover, to stand in celebration of the things that were not taken from us. We have Alps and Nidaja back, and there is cause to believe that the tensions between the Asuna and Amani that were always a clash away from outright war might well come to an end as well. There is peril laced into all things of course, and our hopes and ambitions are not immune to failure, but we cannot give in to our doubts and stifle any chance those hopes might yet have. I do believe at least most of what Mannus has told us, and all of what he’s said he at the very least seems to believe is true.” Uri nodded a bit to Luna as she explained, and smiled in acceptance at least of the things she was to be happy about. Alps and Nidaja were safe, and her friends had defeated the worst that the darkness was known to dish out. They had returned from the Shadowfall.

“Alright, so we take him, for now, at face value. But this still means an unbeatable enemy.” Misha offered, drumming her claw tips on the table rudely.

“... Who requires we exist in order to suffer to retain his existence in this world. We only strengthen him to fret about his existence.” Alps finally added, having been in deep thought through much of this time. There was something he needed to do in all of this. He began to feel that the moment Ellis walked into the room. She seemed endlessly interested in the choices that he was forced to make.

“We should just stop being unhappy then, is that the answer? The Shadowfall crystals will keep him alive, even if we made everyone happy.” Misha grumbled, seeming a bit exasperated. Alps responded.

“We won’t defeat him that way, no, but we also won’t do any damage to him by refusing to find happiness in the things that he hasn’t taken away. I agree with Luna. There are better things to do now than fret and worry. I refuse to believe there is no way to destroy this...”



Avatar, or at least pull out his teeth so he can't wage war any further." Nita looked over to her lover, seeming quite proud with how authoritative he sounded, at least for a slave. Alps looked back to Nita. "I wish to apologize for bringing this trouble to your life, Nita. It was not my intention, and I know my actions have caused you endless worry..." The queen cut off Alps mid-ramble.

"Do not apologize. Our lives are better than you realize for your company, and I intend to have it remain so. I am still taking you as my life-mate. I have not changed my mind at all in my resolution to that end." Nidaja applauded happily at her sister's renewed proclamation. The promise seemed to raise everyone's spirits.

"... No, I caused another complication for you while I was with the Asuna... their reason for kidnapping me, you see..." Alps wore a pained expression, trying to think how to explain it to Nita. He had been fearing this so much before, and still he had nearly forgotten it with the weight of Mannus' return upon his mind.

"You mean Rios borrowing you for her personal breeding stock?" Nita asked. Alps winced. Lyat told her? He then looked up fearfully, having just remembered to ask.

"Lyat explained that to you then. Is he ... alright?" Alps had not seen either hyena since he got back. If Lyat told Nita that, and handed a Shadowfall crystal to his lover, it might not have ended well at all. Nita waved a hand dismissively.

"He's fine. I may not agree with Empress Dominis where her methods are concerned, but her reasoning is sound. Her people are being pushed to the breaking point by Man-... By the Avatar." She corrected herself, looking about with agitation. This change would take some getting used to. "... If the Empress does not allow for a strong and capable heir, the Asuna will be lost. I do *not* forgive them for everything they have done, Alps, but I do understand. If you can forgive Rios her actions against you, I will as well. Also, tactically, I cannot think of a better reason to pursue peace with the Asuna than the sharing of our very lineage, yes?" Alps looked at Nita in near shock. On such a personal and intrusive matter he had not expected her to have such a level of calm understanding. She shared a lot of Rios' worries, it seemed, and perhaps thought carefully about what she might do in the same position. Alps wanted to tell Nita that he forgave Rios already, given that he had come to understand quite well their situation, and their suffering, but he decided that this could probably wait. The main course of their meal, roasted water-fowl, arrived. There was a bit of general light conversation as everyone began with their meals. Alps found his appetite had returned a bit, until Uri, still seeming to obsess on the subject a little, asked a question that put worry right back into the pit of Alps' stomach.

"So, Alps... Do *you* think Mannus is too dangerous to leave alive?" Everyone looked at Uri as if she'd just committed a terrible taboo by asking it right then. Alps thought a bit on that, quietly. He looked to Luna and murmured softly,

"I do not think I am in the right position to make that kind of judgment, Priestess. There are those who he's wronged more severely than me who can better judge his actions. Surely you or Ceriss, who remember the harm he inflicted back then, would be far better suited..." The

priestess gazed at Alps, and then to Nita, as if questioning the queen. Would she defer the judgment to her? Alps agreed at least that the royal house had better right to that decision than he did. Nita spoke up.

“Alps... Since you got back, there has been a matter that we have wanted to verify, and it’s something extremely important to you. I agree with Luna in that it will help you make the decision we are asking you to make. The matter which has come up is due to something Misty saw when we were searching for evidence of you being Letai using the Mindwalk Sphere.” Alps nodded in understanding. They had done this because they had their suspicions that he might have been Letai after he escaped the Shadowfall. Back then, even Misty felt somewhat silly suggesting it, though now it was just accepted as a matter of course. They used the Mindwalk Sphere to move about in his memories, their minds linked to his. The intention was to look at a time before he was an orphan, as he could not remember any further back than that himself. Nidaja had seen his suffering at the hands of Chana and left in his own body to exact revenge on his former owner. Alps had, as a result, not been able to hear about what the others had seen in his memories. Was there something there that he did not remember that would help him decide? Had something Mannus done resulted in his being treated badly as a slave, or even the death of his parents? Or was it the fact that Mannus’ darkest creation, the Shadowfall, was something that he obviously suffered before, when he was a child? He had come to suspect, or even outright acknowledge this at least.

“I don’t remember those things clearly.” Alps stated. “Not even slightly. I don’t remember the suffering, so even what you saw back then does not weigh on me emotionally.” Luna shook her head at Alps and spoke softly, sadly,

“Oh no, Alps. If this... suspicion of Misty’s turns out to be the truth, you will have a lot more right to this decision than you understand right now.” The priestess got up and padded over to Alps’ side of the table, behind the white-furred wolf.

“What?” the slave looked to Nita. “Something about me?” he asked. He had learned more about himself in the past few months than he ever wished he’d known. Life was not so simple now as it had been even months before and he was fearful of what would come next. He looked at Ellis finally. She had been the only one in a long time to give him meaningful advice, but she just gingerly nibbled on a drumstick, looking quite content with her meal as she peered across the long table at him curiously. Even she did not seem to know what they were talking about.

“Let me look in your ear, Alps.” Luna said. She seemed extremely anxious, less calm and collected than the young slave was accustomed to.

“What’s in my ear?” the wolf asked, tilting his head to the side obediently. Luna hesitated. She seemed almost afraid to look. The hesitation seemed so incredibly uncharacteristic for the priestess that the wolf had released. She had always seemed so self-assured and strong, until that very moment.

“Misty said that she saw... something in your past, and she told me about it. I am afraid.

I am afraid to believe and then find out she was mistaken. Please bear with me.” Alps looked sidelong at Luna, who seemed to struggle with the notion of looking in his left ear. His eyes moved to Nita and Misty, who looked at the pair with rapt attention, almost seeming unwilling to breathe and break the tension.

“What’s supposed to be going on with my ear?” the slave asked, flicking his tall, white wolfish ear experimentally. This was starting to give him chills of fear. Luna finally worked up her courage, pulled his ear back a bit, and peered into it, inspecting the warm pink-tinted flesh deeper in. Alps looked at Misty and Nita again, who leaned forward a bit to listen and watch as what he began to feel was a very important scene unfolded. Suddenly, he heard a soft sob as Luna crumpled against him, wrapping her arms around him tightly. Alps’ heart sank at the crying priestess, and he was immediately fearful of how he’d managed to cause it. Ellis had stopped eating, looking as deeply curious as everyone else. The fox seeming surprised at any development frightened Alps even more. He gritted his teeth warily and looked back to Nita. The queen cupped her muzzle a bit, and murmured softly,

“Luna... Is he?” she asked. Apparently, the priestess’ tears had not clearly answered her question. Was he somehow linked to a horrible prophecy? With how things had been going, it would not surprise him to find out that he was doomed before he was even born. Luna looked up at him, tears in her eyes as he tried to figure out what was going on, and she then gazed back to Nita. A smile broke onto her face which relieved Alps even if it didn’t answer him. She nodded to the queen, and hugged the white lupine tightly again, shaking a bit. Nita and Misty cupped their muzzles with a sharp gasp and tears spilled down their cheeks as well. Alps flattened his ears.

“Can anyone *please* tell me what this is all about?” he asked, looking primarily over to Ellis. This had to be another of those things that she failed to mention to him, since she seemed so frequently to know the answers and only share hints. The black fox looked up, mouth full of roast game hen, and shook her head, shrugging. Alps turned back to Nita and murmured, “Please?” The queen seemed to get herself under control, using a napkin to dab at her eyes. The others present, Uri, Misha, and Ceriss, seemed likewise clueless. Misty was the one that finally spoke, her words still a little broken from tears of what Alps decided gladly were actually happiness.

“Alps, the reason that you are the best one to decide what is to be done about Vhale Mannus...” she stood up, walking over to the slave, “... is because you were the victim of his most terrible crime.” The slave looked blankly at the councilor’s words. His most terrible crime?

“...His worst crime that he told *us* about was putting Luna’s child into the Shadowfall. He said so himself.” Alps stated this flatly, thinking that he was not in agreement with the others on what the ‘worst crime’ was. Was that not it? Then the entire scenario fell together in a perfectly assembled heap in his mind. Luna clutching him crying happily was all the clarification he needed when it finally occurred to him what they were saying. Alps grabbed the whimpering priestess, hugging her close. It was impossible. It was impossible, but there was little denying it that moment. The facts were bared and plain to him that echoing, chilling

moment. The steps of logic played out fully in his reeling mind. Mannus stated that casting a child into the Shadowfall was the worst thing he'd done, making it clear it was the first and only time he'd done it. Alps was certain from his experiences that he had been Shadowfallen in his past. There was only one child who had been cast in. Alps was that child. Luna was his mother.

It was hard for the slave to wrap his mind around it. In the orphanage, many times he fantasized about his mother, a beautiful lady kind and tender, scooping him up and being joyful, crying because she was so happy that she found her lost son, and he went to bed with these thoughts even after he was sold as a slave. He would be rescued and happy and he would be given wonderful food and a warm, safe place to rest. He could play with the other kids who ran around with sticks and pretended to fight Uruk in the fields. But here, now, it was real. The fantasy he had given up on only a few years before had just come true. Not only was he now in her arms, feeling safe and warm and joyful, but he had freed her himself. She would be proud of him, yes? This was easily tied with Nita's proposal only months before as the happiest moment of his life. He could not remember any other worry that had ever been on his mind.

Alps finally looked up at Ellis to see if she seemed surprised too. He wanted to know what shock looked like on that normally emotionless face. She *did* seem surprised. Her eyes were round, and her bottom lip quivered a bit. Would she cry too? He hardly imagined her capable of that kind of outburst. She got up, her chair noisily scooting on the wooden floor, her expression strained as she picked up a napkin and dab-dabbed her lips demurely, before she padded out into the hall. Alps lowered his head in understanding. She did not want others to see her any other way but perfectly composed. She would slink away to cry for the happy wolf. He would allow her that. The others noticed, looking after her curiously as she left. There was silence aside from Luna's sniffing over Alps' shoulder, and then, barely audible was heard stifled, twittering laughter from the hallway. Alps quirked a brow. Why was she laughing? What was so funny about Luna being his-

Oh. Alps gritted his teeth. There was that. The priestess seemed to understand what Alps had just realized as the wolf looked at her with an expression of meek and distressed apology. She shook her head, stroking Alps' soft cheek-ruff.

"It's okay sweetie. Neither of us knew." She offered. The laughter in the hall continued, still stifled and barely audible, but likely straining the owner of said laughter to quiet it as she did.

"Yes, nothing to worry about, Alps." Ceriss assured him, waving a hand dismissively. Nidaja touched her lip, looking a bit shocked as well. She had only recently been told, while in the Shadowfall with Alps, what had gone on in the crystal when Alps was freeing his mother. Uri and Misha were not privy to the conversation, and shrugged, but Misty seemed to catch the drift. She spoke loudly as she tried to redirect the topic away from that uninformed act of passion.

"This is worthy of celebration, we should all sit down, eat, drink and be happy for the reunion of mother and son. It's been a long time coming." The councilor held up a glass to toast. This distracted everyone nicely, as all raised their glasses and drank for the two white

wolves in the room. Nidaja gave up her seat to Luna to allow her to sit by her son, and took the priestess' chair across the table. Nita sighed softly and then spoke warmly to her lover.

"I suppose that keeping you as a slave now is no longer a choice you get to make. I doubt your mother would hear of it." She laughed a bit at that, seeming satisfied in how Alps gained his freedom. Luna nodded to Nita on that. Of course her son could not be a slave. That would be silly. She was a Letai high priestess. Even if her return was regarded as a secret, it would be known someday. Alps could not remain as he was. The now former-slave was not distressed by his sudden freedom however, as he spoke warmly,

"Not that it will last. Upon our wedding day, I serve you by choice, without the threat of an auction block." The young lupine male laughed, tail whipping side to side. The High Priestess leaned against Alps' opposite side, wagging quietly, getting control of herself a bit more. Alps looked at her and smiled, feeling extremely complete. How could he cast any kind of judgment against Mannus? He was even less capable of negativity now than he was before. Yeah, Alps got Shadowfallen as a kid, but he didn't remember it. His suffering in that place was lost to him, and while being a slave was rough, it delivered him into Nita's loving arms. He would have to recover from the shock of this wonderful discovery before he could decide the responsible way to handle Whale. He was scarcely able to imagine how long that would take, as joyfully as he felt this day.

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A single candle offered flickering, wavering, unsteady light to a familiar, long missed bedroom. Alps sat naked on the enormous, cushioned bed in the center of the queen's oversized bedroom. He was used to his duties in this place, and everything felt so familiar. For months he had been in a state of peril, and here he was, back safe at home. His thick, full tail wagged briskly back and forth over the sheets as Nita pulled the curtains closed that lead out to the balcony. She looked back to the wolf with a playful smile. Alps sat up a bit, trying to look a bit more proper. He then forced himself to relax a little. The queen chuckled, seeming to be able to read the thought that shot through his mind easily.

"That's right Alps, you are not a slave any longer. You can relax a little." Alps sat up straight again.

"Slave or not, you are still my queen, Nita. You will always be that, even when the time comes to let your heir replace you." The white-furred lupine noted sagely. Nita smiled and ran a fingertip under Alps' chin, her baby-blue robes falling open a little to give the wolf a sly little peek at her lithe and beautiful naked form beneath.

"Already thinking of kids, then?" Nita asked, making the wolf go scarlet under his fur. He stammered a bit.

“I, well, I mean, I have had little choice but to think of it, I mean... with the Asuna... and all.” Nita had a fond chuckle at her lover’s expense. Alps looked back at her quizzically. Nita spoke up again.

“Do not be afraid that I will be jealous that your first son or daughter is not my own. I am proud of you for the things you have done. You have brought me joy and happiness, and in doing so, you bring happiness to others who my decisions affect. If your bloodline can bring the same happiness to the Asuna, then there is nothing to be ashamed of. I won’t have you wait for very long to provide me the same gift, however. I’m not long from my mother’s moon. You will find yourself quite busy during that time, and others will sorely miss seeing you around, as you won’t be getting out much.” Nita laughed. She sat on the bed and whispered to her fiancé, “Now... lay back. I wish to enjoy you as my own for tonight, no more thoughts of what others need or want from you. For now, it is just you and I.” Alps nodded to this, and did as he was asked, closing his eyes a little as he put his hands above his head.

Nita slipped on top of him, not even taking off her robes, but they were not really in the way either. He could see her lovely smallish breasts and her trim tummy as she scooted into place. She pushed her naked sex against his already swelling shaft. He knew what Nita wanted from him, and found himself glad that even with the ferocity of what he’d shared with Nidaja he had no trouble bringing up the energy to give Nita what she wanted. He wanted it just as much. She leaned in and slowly, deeply kissed her soon-to-be life mate. The candles continued to flicker as she held her hips aloft just a little to barely trace the ridge of Alps’ swelling masculinity with the tuft of fur alongside her already begging folds. She held his wrists tightly and just used her delicate touches to gently tease her wolf.

“I have missed you beyond words to describe.” Alps whispered lovingly to the beautiful former holder of his title. “Even though I am free, I would give myself to you willingly for the rest of our lives. I can think of nothing but you so often...” Nita smiled as the wolf buttered her up a little with his kind and adoring words of near worship. She whispered softly,

“You need not worry that I think your mind wanders. I know what I mean to you. I can see it in your eyes when you watch me across the court while I am tending to my royal duties. Just as you need not worry that I would want you less one day. You are mine, given to me by such complex twists of fate that I could not dream of denying my fortune in your grace.” She said, pushing her hips a little harder down on the wolf, slipping her moistening folds against his now pulsing shaft. She applied a glaze of her honey to him before beginning to stroke him fondly against her with short, slow undulations of her hips.

“This is one of the happiest days I can remember... So much has happened, but in the end, I am where I need to be, and the people who love me are all around me. I am happy, Nita.” Alps said, wanting his lover to know that she brought him the one thing he had never been given before they met.

“I am sorry that you do not remember your childhood, but I am sure that some of those nicer memories of before you were in the orphanage... before you knew that awful Chana... will come back to you. Luna will tell you of those days. She might spark a few memories, and we

can share them..." Nita said. Alps blushed as his cock twitched hard against his lover's nethers. She gave a playful grin. "Now, about the little embarrassment at the table." The queen asked. "What was the lovely Luna talking about, huh? What did you do in the Shadowfall? I think I know..." she crooned. Alps squirmed.

"Aw, come on, I didn't know. And she seemed to really need that, and it was the energy that she released that I used, in part, to escape the Shadowfall, so I kind of had to, you know?" he said, fidgeting. Alps was not unhappy, but he was a little distressed because the thought, the memories of what he had done to Luna did not bring down his excitement for Nita at all, whereas he thought that kind of teasing should probably have some negative effect on that thickly throbbing flesh that Nita stirred eagerly with her slick and needy folds.

"How about Ceriss, her too?" Nita asked, leaning in a little tighter to stroke up her wolf nicely. Alps arched his back, huffing hotly. He wanted so much to just slip inside his beloved, feel her body nursing his pleasure and drawing his desire to its breaking point, but he let her keep control, as she was still holding his wrists in a way that made him feel that she was truly claiming him, which he rather liked.

"Huh... aheh... Yes, Ceriss too. Both quite... vigorously. Neither had been touched in ... centuries. Letai crave the energy of pleasure and joy and happiness. The chance at it was like roast waterfowl to one who is starving. Irresistible. Nnnh... To be honest.. even if Luna had.. known... in her state, I am not sure knowing would have been enough... to make her stop..." he admitted, remembering very clearly how on edge the priestess was when he first found her in the Shadowfall. He liked the experience, he could not take that back, but he had a new relationship and a new life to build, with Luna a very key part of it. Things might be different, but that memory would not go away. Alps groaned deeply, forcing the air from his lungs as he felt Nita's sex claim him finally, her hips slipping a little farther back before scooping him into her slick, suckling depths.

"Good booooyyy..." Nita groaned as well, feeling him throb inside her. "How about that odd little fox? She was on edge too, yes?" Nita asked. "They say foxes are graceful lovers." The queen teased. Alps gritted his teeth, suddenly fearing a boot to the face for even thinking of Ellis while in the throes of pleasure with his mate.

"Who Ellis? No, not interested. I think she's got too many other things going on to even think about that stuff. But she saw what I did to Ceriss and Luna. She didn't seem to care for it. I forget sometimes that not all my friends... oh goodness yes..." he arched his back, lifting Nita's hips up as he pushed himself nice and deep into his softly panting lover. She could hold him like that forever as far as he was concerned.

"Oh? So if she offered, would you?" Nita asked, very obviously and mirthfully teasing as she sped up. Alps panted lightly. This was heaven. He pushed back, hands moving up in the gap of Nita's blue robes, grasping her bouncing breasts a little, letting them roll in his palms as he felt the hard points of her nipples.

"I think I would be afraid to. She is a very strange... scary person." Alps huffed. Nita

lowered her head, getting into a nice rhythm.

“Well, I don’t judge you for any of that. These are all things which brought you back to me. I am happy to have you, and don’t want to let you go again. You are mine, and I will one day let everyone... every Amanian alive, know my joy.” With that, she lowered her chest to Alps’ own, and slipped her hands behind his head, panting over his shoulder as her hips pumped heavily up and down, pistoning the thick wolf cock inside her. Alps slipped his hands down to clutch her rump to help her force and rhythm, pulling her hard to him.

“I’m getting close.” Alps admitted. He was a little shamed, as the reason he was so close was Nita making him think of what he did to Luna. He closed his eyes tightly, and grimaced as she sped up.

“That’s not likely... to stop me this time...” she panted. Alps widened his eyes, knowing very well what she meant.

“I’m gonna...” he whimpered, a little alarmed at how quickly he was rising to the moment of his own pleasure. Something felt a little different. He became a little more keenly aware of the essence that he was drawing upon. Nita’s beautiful, pure light that was washing over him. Alps lurched up, pushing himself deep, and then giving a sinking rush of his growling voice as his thick seed sprayed hard inside her. As promised, even as he spouted hard in her gulping sex, she didn’t abate in her speed or force. She began offering short little barks of pleasure. Alps leaned back, letting her ride him to her release, marveling at her beauty dizzily as he flooded her hot channel with his seed. It was that moment when he realized that he was not just drawing her essence. There was someone else, close by... close.

He looked down by the balcony. He could see a shadow on the other side. Someone was hiding behind it. He focused, trying hard to recognize the essence, but he had not been intentionally drawing it long. He pushed his own light outward from him, and stroked the other person with it, letting them feel the heat of his passion and release. He used the form of his essence to “feel” the shape of the other person, learning their size, position, and with a blush, their activity. He heard a soft squeak from behind the curtain. Neit. The little thief was watching from under the curtain, laying on her back, strumming her soaking pussy as quietly and greedily as she could. Nita did not hear the squeak, only speeding up as Alps resumed thrusting at his lover from underneath. Oh yes, having these new essence abilities would be a lot of fun for the wolf. He intended to study them hard, but for now, if he was being watched, it was time to give a good show. He rolled Nita on her back, the plaintively huffing queen making a hot little cry of delight as he pinned her and began pumping his hips hard and fast.

“Yes, love, give it to me! Give me all you have!” she cried, feeling that spunk rolling down her inner thigh from where some of his heavy fluids had spilled from her sex. Alps growled and gripped his lover tight, knowing that the position he rolled her to gave the voyeur a clear view of deep royal penetration. Alps found himself utterly thrilled to give a show to the private watcher, and found himself reaching his peak again.

“Nhh... Yis! All of it... Here we go...” he promised. Nita seized up, climaxing as Alps



gave her a bludgeoning with his hips that loudly scooted the bed back and forth on the cool flagstones that made up the bedroom's floor. Alps barked out with a happy, heated cry of release, and in mere minutes after the first time, found himself heavily painting Nita's cervix with his thick release all over again, holding her as his body jerked and spasmed with pleasure. He pushed his essence out intentionally again, and held it against the other person, feeling her release right along with theirs. He could feel his body readily claiming, consuming, feeding on that energy like soaking up sunshine on a cold winter morning. It was magnificent. He rested himself over Nita, panting as she twitched and groaned and protested not at all.

After a few moments of resting with Nita like this, Alps felt his contact with Neit on the ground by the balcony break. She had moved back, perhaps to crawl off to bed. He wondered how often the girl had watched him. Alps looked back at the panting, weakened, happy queen beneath him. He'd not tell her. The act of not being caught was the thing which gave Neit so much energy in her release when it finally hit. Trying to be quiet, trying to enjoy it without being seen, the danger and thrill of being clandestine. She'd not steal again, but this she could do. Alps would allow her. He closed his eyes, holding Nita.

"Thank you, oh heavens I needed that." She murmured. "I have been focused on work in your absence, and not even my own hands were enough to distract me. I feel rejuvenated." Alps slipped back a little, though keeping his cock deep inside that suckling, spasming pussy. He smiled at his lover and murmured,

"I think you will have to make more time for this again. A very suitable end to a wonderful day. Not everything went as planned, but at the end of the night, I am in your arms, and that's all that matters to me." The former slave crooned happily.

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Luna regarded Alps quietly, having no reservation about gazing at him with a renewed adoration. It was not very different from how she watched him before. She always had a motherly feel about her, it just felt more natural now. The shock of the earlier revelation had worn off a little, and he was feeling a little more comfortable and happy about it. Still, even with that nice feeling running through him, he had been dreading this task.

Mannus had been awakened; the herbal extract no longer applied every few hours by Ceriss. He sat on a chair alone in a large empty room with his hands bound behind him. He did not seem to mind. His hair hung down over his eyes as he breathed softly and slowly. Alps watched him for a little bit. This was the start of seven hundred years of suffering, and perhaps the ultimate doom of their world, he told himself. He would have to remember that. His life was not the only one affected by this person. And Alps was the very same child that Vhale had sent directly to what should have been eternal suffering and nightmare. Even if he was regretting it, he had still committed unspeakable crimes against all of civilization.

“How do you feel?” Alps asked calmly. He furrowed his brow at his own words. That’s not what he meant to say. He was supposed to be there to cast judgment on Vhale. There was not a lot of room for compassion in this task. It felt so unnatural to Alps to be expected to be angry.

“My head hurts. Those herbs are pretty powerful stuff.” He said, looking at Luna with half-closed eyes. Luna looked away innocently, despite being the real reason behind the headache.

“I have been apprised of the information they wished to share with me, so I am in a better position to decide your fate.” Alps stated almost casually. He was just not feeling angry enough to act the way he thought he was supposed to act in his position. It was almost eerie.

“Was it anything I should remember?” Vhale asked. “If it affects your judgment in my fate, I am a bit curious.” The former slave looked to Luna curiously. Was he supposed to talk about it? Luna seemed to think a little as they exchanged glances, and then smiled and nodded slowly. Alps looked back to Vhale and swallowed. He immediately understood why Luna agreed. If Mannus had been telling the truth, what he did to Alps was what ended his reign of terror. It caused him to suffer so much that he could not resume his destined mission, even at the risk of the end of the world which he believed was still a possibility at the time. Now, he would be facing that very person he committed that crime upon. It suddenly made perfect sense to Alps why Luna wanted him to do this. The white-furred male finally spoke.

“You would remember me... if I were a great deal smaller... maybe six years old.” Alps offered. Mannus looked at him curiously, seeming not to get the implication right away, and then the life seemed to suddenly sink out of him, the prisoner suddenly looking violently ill.

“No...” he murmured softly, his voice a strangled croak of disbelief.

“Yes. I have verified it myself.” Luna said imperatively. Vhale shook his head.

“He was just a child.” His words sounded utterly haunted. Alps suddenly felt a little bad about Vhale. He seemed to genuinely suffer in his presence. But, as the white lupine male watched him, his shock seemed less mixed with regret, and more with actual fear. Was he finally afraid of dying? Or was he afraid Alps could do worse to him? Alps was capable of casting the Shadowfall, even if he did not intend to do that again if he could at all help it.

“I got out of the crystal for the very first time when I was a child. I don’t remember much about those early days. I remember only the orphanage, not anything before then. But, I did have reason to believe that when I released Luna it had not been the first time I had been in the crystal. It felt familiar somehow.” Mannus’ eyes were round and fearful as Alps spoke, the dark wolf actually softly shaking.

“No, how could this...” he murmured in disbelief.

“Then, Nidaja and Nita used a Mindwalk sphere on me, to see parts of my past I had

forgotten, interested in finding out when I might have been Shadowfallen before. They suspected even then I was Letai, but the Letai had long since vanished, so it made no sense. But in my memories, they saw Luna, looking much as she does now. Misty suspected very much at that point.”

“Impossible... the chances are... are nothing, zero... and then to just find me... and release me...” Whale whimpered, seeming suddenly near tears. Alps hated seeing him suffer, even if he agreed with Luna that it was certainly deserved. The former slave derived no pleasure from this.

“Last night at dinner, Luna checked inside my ear. She remembered clearly that when I was a child I had four little speckles in that ear, and when she looked, there they were, as much proof as either of us needed.” Alps stated. Mannus hung his head.

“So that’s it, huh?” he rumbled with a sullen, sinking tone. “Eternal suffering was not enough, the universe wanted to really drive the point home... You being the one to free me is proof that what comes next is certainly my destiny. I will accept your judgment.” Whale looked up into Alps’ eyes with his own red irises rising, pupils shrinking a bit as they regarded Alps fearfully. “But I have to know something first.” He asked.

“Yes?” Alps asked, leaning in closer.

“What do you remember of your Shadowfall?” the black-furred wolf inquired, his voice wavering.

“Nothing.” The former slave replied. “I don’t remember anything of it. Why do you ask?”

“Alps...” he finally said after some reflection, “I don’t want you to remember whatever nightmares may have presented themselves to you in there, just let it go. If fate would let you enjoy life without those memories, that would be kind and just. Even if you think it might help you to make the right choices, believe me you don’t want that torment. I don’t know how you gained the abilities that you have, but to have gained them as a child, I rather doubt the learning experience was pleasant.” Alps nodded to that. He understood.

“So, what will your judgment be?” Luna asked finally, slipping her hands over Alps’ shoulders and holding him from behind.

“I deserve no less than the worst death I can imagine. Given my experience, I would think that the worst you could imagine would seem compassionate in comparison.” Whale said with self-loathing.

“You’ll get nothing like that from me.” Alps stated slowly, his mind reeling as he thought hard. This seemed to all fall together like a puzzle. Alps ended the darkness that Whale had committed himself to, and prevented him from continuing his war. The Avatar sent Whale to an eternal prison perhaps with a taste for irony or just longing for the wolf’s suffering. Alps freed

himself somehow, and later returned to start undoing Whale's darkness. Somehow, ending Whale's life did not seem like the right shape puzzle piece to use next. It didn't fit. What fit? What ironic justice did fate seem to want now?

"He is right, Alps. He does deserve it, and even if you don't give it to him, there is a world full of people out there who would kill you to have the chance to do it. I know you dislike the thought, but this is the logical next step." The priestess spoke regretfully to Alps, having likely put a lot of thought into it as well. Alps looked at his mother dolefully. She had expected him to responsibly choose death for Whale. It was the logical choice, but it felt like the wrong one for Alps. Somehow, he just knew there was something else. Then, a thought darted through him, an answer that seemed to fit in with everything else thus far.

"What is logical and what is right aren't always the same." Alps said slowly, feeling that sudden rush through him, the way he did when he knew he had figured out a puzzle, in the Shadowfall, on the mountainside when he buried the Uruk army, he just knew. There was a short silence as his eyes traced back and forth in thought, as if reading rapidly a book that wasn't there, habitual for the former slave. Alps looked up at Luna. "Logically, you should never have seen me again, and eternal suffering would be your decided fate. But that was not right. This is what is right. I have my family back, and I know happiness in spite of all that I have endured. It's not logical, given the odds, but it's right." Luna's lip trembled in apparent realization of Alps' determination and conviction. It was Mannus who spoke up.

"If not death, what would you do? You endanger your friends leaving me alive. I won't harm anyone ever again, I can promise, but I cannot promise others who wish me dead won't harm you or others. Luna is right." Mannus stated.

"Whale, since the day I met you..." Alps growled, deciding that he had simply had enough of the dark wolf's self-pity and death-begging. "... since the day we first crossed paths, I have been cleaning up your mess!" Mannus shrank back a bit, and Luna let go of Alps' shoulders as he raised his voice.

"Alps..." his mother murmured with concern. Her son continued with irritation in his voice.

"I don't even want to know what I did to get out of that crystal the first time I was there, or what kind of things happen to a child in that place. As far as I am concerned I am *glad* I don't remember. But when I got out, I got shunted into an orphanage where I was viewed as a burden. The folks who ran the place had no problem telling me that I was likely abandoned because I looked different, and I was treated like I was afflicted with an incurable disease, with pity and held at a distance. As soon as they could, they threw me on the auction block. A lot of my earliest memories are of not being good enough to sell as a slave, much less be adopted. Yeah, I don't remember shit from the Shadowfall, but you know what? That place lives off the suffering, fears and doubts in the person's own mind. As a beloved child of a High Priestess, I kind of doubt I went in with a large variety of sufferings and fears. So maybe I don't remember the place because *nothing* happened. Why would I remember over 600 years of just feeling bored and alone? I had plenty of new memories to suffer through that trumped all that." Alps

ranted. Luna gritted her teeth.

“Children have fears.” Whale clarified.

“But I doubt I knew suffering. Not real suffering.” Alps snapped back. “Not until I got out. When I got out, oh then... then I knew suffering. I was finally sold to a drunk regional matriarch with a reputation for violence, and if you think my youth exempted me from it, I have a few scars you should see. And I do not hesitate to place the blame for each one of those scars squarely on you, Whale!” Alps grabbed Mannus’ muzzle and forced him to look up at him. “Look at me, stop staring at the floor. Now, I have happiness. You have seen the people around me, ready to risk their lives for me, and willing to face even the Avatar together with me. In the coming days or years or maybe for the rest of my life, I will be working to undo the damage you have done. I will free more priestesses, perhaps. I will maybe find new ways to wipe out Uruk armies. I will serve my queen as her life mate just as hard and reliably as I did as her slave. This world needs to be fixed, and who better than a slave to do it? But! This is *your* mess, Whale. Do you honestly think I am just going to let you die and leave this mess? Do you know who has to finish cleaning it up? *Me!* Fuck you, you jerk, I will not let that happen. So here is my judgment.” Alps said, letting Mannus’ muzzle go and turning away.

“Alps, it’s okay, you don’t have to decide right now.” Luna murmured with a worried tone in her voice. Alps knew she had not heard him sound so angry before, but the woe-is-me bit from Whale was wearing on him. Whale was not the one who was having it hard right now. The rest of the world was.

“I have decided already.” The white lupine replied to her, arms crossed as he faced her, and away from Whale. “Whale Mannus will be allowed to live, but... a life of privilege and a lack of discipline was what led to his grand mistake. He will not be afforded such opportunity again.” Alps turned around, facing the prisoner again.

“Being stripped of further opportunity is not a punishment.” Whale stated.

“No, it is not, but I have better shit to do than stand around punishing you. Whale, you are now a slave to the royal house, just as I have been.” Alps narrowed his eyes at the prisoner.

“That’s crazy, even if you worked me in the heat or in the mines it would not be enough.” Mannus growled with despair. Alps cut him off.

“I told you! I am not cleaning up your mess alone. As a slave to the royal house, you will do as I say, and you will aid me to the very death in my attempts to give this world a future. The Asuna are still enslaved, the Amanians are being pushed slowly into the ocean, and there is an entire continent uninhabited by anything but soulless golems. I have a lot of fucking work to do and you do too. This is *not* a choice for you, Whale. You are responsible for the Avatar, and you are going to help fix this problem.” Mannus looked fearfully at Alps and spoke with a trembling voice.

“It’s not as easy as just storming his fortress and killing him. He’s in between. He’s

partly in the Nether, and partly here. When I realized what he was, I even tried to cast him into the Shadowfall. He simply ignored it and laughed. Blades won't cut him, essence won't affect him." Whale explained. Alps narrowed his eyes, leaning in close to the dark-furred wolf.

"I don't care if you are *afraid* of it, Whale. You aren't afraid of dying, and seem to think you deserve the worst thing I can imagine... well this *is* the worst thing I can imagine. Knowing that you are about to follow someone who intends to defy this thing should be sufficient punishment."

"Alps, others will not agree with this. Your friends will worry for you. They already suspect Whale of treachery." Luna stated.

"As they are wise to do." The dark wolf pled. "Alps, you risk too much."

"And yet, I feel like I am doing the right thing, just as I have done all along. You let me regret my choices if I need to later, but for now, I get to make this as my first free choice. I'm not a slave anymore, and I intend to act like it." With that, Alps turned and left, leaving a still bound Whale in the room. Luna quickly followed him, closing and locking the door behind her. She caught up with Alps.

"Are you sure this course is wise, Aris?" she asked, automatically reverting to using his original name. She had done this a few times already, but it still felt a little strange. Nita still called him Alps. "Whale is still dangerous. He had a very troubled mind..." Luna fell into step behind Alps.

"... He had a foolish and arrogant mind, mother." Alps said solidly. "He is not helplessly sick. He knew his mistake the moment he finally saw the Avatar. He was fooled because he believed himself infallible. He does not believe this anymore."

"What good does he do us left alive though? He's a political liability and a clear danger to your friends from others if they find out who he is." The priestess gestured back the way they came. "... Even he knows what would happen if one single Asuna knew his identity. They would kill everyone who stood between them and him to get their hands on him and make him pay."

"Then his presence among us is to be a secret. He gets a new name to go along with his new slave's life, just like I did. If he tries real hard, maybe he can make half as many people happy." Alps said with continued determination. He was very certain of his decision. This was the answer that fell into place in this puzzle. This was the answer that felt right. Luna sighed with some resignation, and spoke again.

"We can keep the secret, I am sure, not many people know, but what use is *he*? Will he just carry your stuff when you are travelling or something? I would not trust him to use the essence again, it may invite more trouble upon him, and I think he knows it. He's not even tried to draw upon our essence, and for Letai that can be involuntary. He's literally shut himself off out of fear of his own power. He'll be worthless in a fight." Alps looked back to his mother, and

then leaned against a wall, not walking a moment as he considered this. He knew that he could not expect Mannus to fight. He could tell the wolf was fearful of ever handling the essence again, and it would be wrong to force him to fight as a slave. He finally spoke.

“Mother... I have a lot of work to do and not a lot of time to do it. I will need his help for menial things as any slave could do, but the reason I need Vhale... is because of what he knows. To do what I need to do, what the world needs all of us to do, I will need to know what he did that eventually brought us all here. I will need to fully understand what I am dealing with. I will find a way. Even if the Avatar cannot be killed, it would be enough, at least for a while, to break his ability to wage war on a large scale. The Uruk were created by Vhale. He may be able to figure out a way to stop them. He’s fearful now, but I think he will come around. I don’t have time to figure out all of this stuff on my own. When the Avatar finally figures out what’s going on, he will come down on all of Asuna and Amani in a very big way.” Alps explained. He had originally been afraid to even return home and endanger his lovers for that very reason.

“Then what do you intend to do, Aris? Have you already got some kind of plan in place?” Luna asked, gesturing a bit with exasperation.

“Not a full plan yet, no, but I have an idea of what I have to do first. I just need to figure out all the steps to get there.” Alps explained.

“What is that?” the priestess asked.

“I have to free the Asuna. Their slavery and their suffering *have* to end before we can do anything else.” The former slave said this with a tone of utter finality.

“I understand that it is necessary to have the Asuna freed so that the Avatar has no one making new Uruk and we can fight a war of attrition, but that is not a very realistic short term goal. It would take years to even get them all to understand that the Amanians were saving them and not conquering them. Even then, it might take decades to be able to defend them against outright invasion by the Uruk, even if we combine our numbers. Early on, the numbers would be greatly stacked against us. The Asuna would be wiped out. Years of our work would be lost.” Luna explained. Alps narrowed his eyes.

“Oh I *will* do this, and I will succeed.” Her son’s tone was deep and commanding. Luna gritted her teeth a bit as he continued somewhat grimly. “However, we cannot take years to do this. They *have* to be free of Uruk control in less than eight months.”